AFRICAN AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN AND THEIR
PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF ENGAGEMENT ON
THEIR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

by

BERNICE NORVELLA KING-STRONG

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON
May 2015
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my creator for sustaining me throughout this process and the completion of this degree. This dissertation is dedicated to my late beloved son, Mr. Brandon LeNorman Strong. I know that you are celebrating with me. You were always my cheerleader and the one to dream big dreams. I have fulfilled this dream for us both.

I have been blessed to have professors, who have given me moral and academic support during my coursework and this dissertation. First, I wish to thank Dr. Amah for her untiring support and the unwavering demand for high caliber work from her doctoral students. I want to acknowledge Dr. Casey for her motivating spirit and her belief in me as a writer, Dr. Hungerford-Kresser for her suggestions about how to present my supplementary theoretical framework centering around Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) and support with writing about my personal relevance to the study, and Dr. Allen for critiquing my work as a higher education scholar. I would especially like to thank my daughters, Adrienne Strong and Carmen Strong Evans, brothers and sisters, biological and acquired, and niece Melissa Strong for their support and encouragement.

Each of the talented, outstanding, and courageous African American undergraduate women that participated in this study deserves my gratitude for without your participation this study would not have been possible. Each of you took time out of your busy, hectic and tight schedules to contribute to the discourse on African American undergraduate women and academic and social engagement. I thank you all immensely for your candidness, eagerness and fervor during our meetings about your lives realities on and off campus.
Finally, I wish to thank my loving husband, LeNorman Strong. Without your support this critical endeavor would have never been accomplished. Your unwavering support and encouragement throughout this journey leaves me speechless.

March 4, 2015
Abstract

AFRICAN AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN AND THEIR
PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF ENGAGEMENT ON
THEIR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Bernice King-Strong, PhD

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2015

Supervising Professor: Ifeoma Amah

This phenomenological study examined how nine African American undergraduate women perceive the influences of their academic and social engagement practices on their academic achievement. This study took place at the University of California at Joplin, an elite, public predominantly White, institution (PWI) in Northern California. The participants, who included four juniors, four sophomores, and one senior, came from diverse familial, academic and social backgrounds.

Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000; 2009) and Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) were the theoretical constructs used in this study. The data collection process included: 1) two semi structured interviews with each participant about their personal and educational backgrounds as well as academic and social engagement practices both inside and outside of the classroom, 2) analytical memos, 3) field notes, and 4) participant selected photographs. After the interviews were transcribed, the data collected were analyzed for emerging themes (Patton, 1990).

Findings from this study revealed that: 1) African American undergraduate women perceive their academic achievement to be their ultimate goal of college attendance, 2) perceived disadvantages of academic and social engagement did not derail academic achievement, 3) hostile racial climates at PWIs cause feelings of isolation for AAUW, 4) PWIs should create campus climates that will foster academic
achievement for AAUW, and 5) AAUW require support from faculty in order to be prepared for post-graduation engagement. Implications for research, practice and policy are discussed in relation to African American undergraduate women’s realities at elite public predominantly White universities, and how these women’s experiences can inform the discourse regarding ways to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of historically underrepresented students.
## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................iii

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... v

List of Tables .....................................................................................................................xiv

Chapter 1 Introduction......................................................................................................... 1
  Statement of the Problem ................................................................................................. 6
  Summary.......................................................................................................................... 9
  Purpose of the Study...................................................................................................... 10
  Personal Relevance ....................................................................................................... 11
  Personal Engagement Practices .................................................................................... 12
  Professional Career ....................................................................................................... 15
  A Connection to My Daughters’ College Realities ......................................................... 17
  Research Goals ............................................................................................................. 18
  Organization of this Dissertation and Summary ............................................................ 19

Chapter 2 Literature Review ............................................................................................. 21
  African American Undergraduate Women in American Higher Education
  Institutional Characteristics and Environments and African American Women’s
  Achievement .................................................................................................................. 27
  Predominantly White Institutions vs. Historically Black Colleges and
  Universities................................................................................................................... 28
  Summary..................................................................................................................... 34
  Historically Black Colleges and Universities vs Predominantly White
  Institutions .................................................................................................................... 35
  Single-Sex vs. Co-Ed Institutions................................................................................. 36
  Single-Sex Institutions................................................................................................. 38
Interviews .................................................................................................................... 77
Field Notes .................................................................................................................. 78
Analytical Memos ........................................................................................................ 79
Photography ................................................................................................................ 79
Transcripts .................................................................................................................. 80
Interview Data Analysis ............................................................................................. 81
Trustworthiness/Rigor ................................................................................................. 82
Role of the Researcher ............................................................................................... 83
Summary ..................................................................................................................... 85
Chapter 5 A Portrait of Our Personal and Academic Trajectories ......................... 86
Brief Demographic Summaries .................................................................................. 86
Family Background .................................................................................................... 86
Matriculation Level ................................................................................................... 87
Socioeconomic Status ................................................................................................. 87
Participants’ Biographical Sketches ........................................................................... 87
Bailey ......................................................................................................................... 88
Drew ......................................................................................................................... 89
Elena ........................................................................................................................ 90
Erykah ....................................................................................................................... 91
Jasmine ...................................................................................................................... 92
Lara .......................................................................................................................... 94
Lucille ......................................................................................................................... 95
Melissa ...................................................................................................................... 96
Storm ......................................................................................................................... 96
Summary ..................................................................................................................... 97
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 8 Conclusions, Findings, and Implications</th>
<th>183</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview of Study</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Findings</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Finding Number One</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Finding Number Two</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Finding Number Three</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Finding Number Four</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Finding Number Five</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Classroom Spaces</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Classroom Spaces</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Policy</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Classroom Spaces</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside Classroom Spaces</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Research</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Undergraduate Women and Engagement</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This Study and Future Research</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Thoughts</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A Recruitment Letter to Faculty/Staff</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B Recruitment Letter to Student Participants</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C Initial Email Response to Selected Participants</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D Reminder Script for First Interview</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E Informed Consent Document</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F Reminder Script for Second Interview ......................................................... 217
Appendix G Participant Demographic Questionnaire ..................................................... 219
Appendix H Prompt for Photograph Activity ................................................................. 223
Appendix I Interview Protocol 1 ...................................................................................... 225
Appendix J Interview Protocol 2 ...................................................................................... 228
References ...................................................................................................................... 231
Biographical Information ............................................................................................... 246
List of Tables

Table 1.1 Women Outpace Men in College Enrollment ...................................................... 1
Table 1.2 African American Women and Men College Graduation Rates ......................... 3
Table 4.1 Six-Year Graduation Rates for Undergraduate Student Population Based on 2005 Cohort ...................................................................................................................... 72
Table 4.2 Six-Year Graduation Rates for California Graduates ........................................ 73
Table 4.3 Demographic Characteristics, Engagement, and Work Status ......................... 76
Chapter 1

Introduction

Historically, African American\(^1\) students have not participated at four-year institutions of higher education in the United States (U.S.) at the same rate as their White counterparts (Casselman, 2014). Because the enrollment of African Americans is low, there is a national concern about troubling trends in their persistence rates\(^2\). National persistence to graduation rates of first-time, full-time students beginning in 2001 were found to be 59.4% for White students and 40.5% for Black students, indicating a gap in degree attainment by race (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2009). Although African American students in general are not enrolling in college as much as their White counterparts, African American women are increasingly enrolling at the nation’s two-year and four-year higher education institutions (Casselman, 2014). (See table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Women Outpace Men in College Enrollment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>African American</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>+9 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>+12 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asian</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>+1 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>+3 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>+13 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>+4 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>+10 women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{1}\) For the purpose of this study, African American and Black are used interchangeably.

\(^{2}\) Persistence is being defined as a student’s continued enrollment each semester/quarter/term year after year until graduation (Aud, 2013).
More recent statistics show a trend of women outpacing men in enrollment at the nation’s four-year institutions (PRC, 2014)

Even though college enrollments of the nation’s youth have risen over the last three decades, data from the (PRC, 2014) revealed that females outpace males in college enrollment. Among Hispanics and African Americans, a 1995 analysis of US Census Bureau data information showed 63% of female high school graduates and 61% of male high school graduates were enrolled in the fall immediately following their high school graduations. By the year 2012, the trend continues. Although African American women lag behind White men and women statistics show an even stronger trend toward Black females enrolling in college more than Black men. Women’s’ increase of eight percentage points, from 63% to 71% showed their enrollment on the rise while men’s enrollment remained stagnated at 61% (PRC, 2014). A similar pattern is seen among young Hispanics. In 1994, among Hispanics who completed high school, about half of men and women immediately enrolled in college. Nearly two decades later, college enrollments for both groups improved, but women outpaced men by 13 percentage points.

The discussion and plight of African American college students has been a critical concern for more than two decades (Cabrera, Nora, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Hagedorn, 1999; Cuyjet, 2006; Dancy, 2010; Devarics, 2011; Edwards, 2013; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Strayhorn, 2009). However, the focus of concern about African American undergraduate students’ college enrollment and persistence has been unequal. While many studies report on the low achievement and persistence rates of Black undergraduate men, there is limited research on the experiences and academic achievement of African American undergraduate women in college (Banks, 2009; Fries-Britt, 2002; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Jackson, 1998; Rosales & Person, 2004; Turner,
Data reported in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (2006) indicated that African American women attend college and graduate at higher rates than their male peers (See Table 1.2). Additionally, recent data from PRC (2014) also showed that women, AAUW included, outpaced men in college enrollment. Even with the increase of enrollment and matriculation of these women, insufficient research has focused on African American undergraduate women’s college experiences (Haniff, 1991; Matthews & Jackson, 1991; Robinson & Franklin, 2011; Von Robertson, Mitra, & Van Delinder, 2005).

Table 1.2 African American Women and Men College Graduation Rates Nationwide (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Graduation rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the increase of AAUW in enrollment and graduation rates is evident on the nation’s college campuses, there is a paucity of research regarding the academic achievement and/or persistence of African American women in college (Banks, 2009; Fries-Britt, 2002; King, 1990). Additionally, many studies on African American college students where men and women were surveyed or interviewed did not make distinctions between Black men and women. The data resulting from these studies combine the responses of Black male and Black female collegians. Combining responses for the entire group conceals the successes of African American undergraduate women (Fries-Britt, 2002). Studies conducted by (Cujet, 2006; Harper, 2012; Stayhorn, 2008) have examined African American men’s collegiate experiences and their engagement practices on both Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). These studies do not focus on the lives of African American women and their engagement while in college. The term engagement
throughout this dissertation will refer to “the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success” (Kuh et al. 2005, p. 9, and “the way the institution allocates resources and organize learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities” (Kuh et al, 2005, p. 9). Rendon and Munoz (2011) also define engagement as a process where by students make and build connections with other students and members of the college community that result in meaningful relationships that begin to take place. Authors stress the importance of student engagement and how necessary the practice of various types of engagement are to student persistence and educational attainment in college (Kuh, 2009; Randall, 2013).

Recently, researchers have begun to explore not only engagement of African American men but, of AAUW in postsecondary settings (Chambers & Poock, 2011; Harper et al., 2004). The focus of such inquiry was to see if there were engagement differences between genders and if engagement equaled positive results for AAUW. In Harper’s et al., (2004) quantitative study of gender differences in engagement for AAUW focuses on AAUW on 12 HBCUs. In Chambers and Poock (2011) study, data were used from the NSSE to determine the results of engagement on AAUW experiences in college. Since limited studies are focused on AAUW and engagement, there is a need is need for qualitative inquiry focusing on academically successful African American undergraduate women who attend an elite, predominantly White public university, using a qualitative approach.

Although there are quantitative studies (Chambers & Poock, 2011; Harper, Carini, Hayek & Bridges, 2004) concerning engagement and African American undergraduate women, there exist limited qualitative studies specifically addressing the experiences of academically successful AAUW (Robinson & Franklin, 2011). Particularly
absent from the literature are the perceptions these women report that they believe result from their experiences at predominantly White elite universities, and engagement practices and strategies they utilize to achieve academic success in college. Since enrollment and matriculation of African American undergraduate women is increasing at the nation’s colleges and universities, discussions of African American undergraduate women in research studies are necessary because there is scarcity in the extant literature. It is important to study AAUW perceptions about the connection between their engagement and their academic success because there are no qualitative studies being undertaken presently that investigate the engagement experiences of AAUW and how they perceive the influence that their involvement has on their academic achievement.

As stated earlier, since there is a paucity of qualitative research studies focusing on African American undergraduate women and their experiences in college, their perceptions of engagement and which practices influence their academic achievement, this study is useful. To conduct a study with particular focus on their academic and social experiences that help these women to achieve success in college is also informative. As the literature has indicated, African American undergraduate women are less satisfied at elite predominantly White institutions because of their experiences of racism, isolation, and hostility (Allen, 1988,; 1991; Astin, 1993; Fleming, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Robinson & Franklin, 2011; Von Robertson, Mitra & Van Delinder, 2005). African American undergraduate women have been persisting and achieving academic success at greater rates over the past 10 years. Data from the U. S. Department of Education’s National Center for Statistics (2010) revealed that between the years of 2007-2008, 61,220 African American women earned an Associate’s degree, 93,743 earned a bachelor’s degree, 41,409 earned a master’s degree; 2,900 earned a professional degree, and 3,136 earned their doctorates (NCES, 2010; Robinson & Franklin, 2011).
Nationally, the percentage of African American women enrolling in and persisting through graduation across four-year higher education institutions exceeds that of African American men ages 18-24. Data from the Digest of Educational Statistics indicate that 46.1% of African American women complete their degrees within six years in comparison to 34.81% of African American men (NCES, 2011). Over the past twenty years, African American women have not only outnumbered men on Historically Black Colleges and University (HBCU) campuses, they are now becoming increasingly visible on predominantly White campuses (PWIs) (Allen, 1992; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Fleming, 1984; Elise & Rolison, 2003; Zamani, 2003). Despite this reported increase in enrollment of African American women, data indicate that they still do not persist or graduate, once enrolled, at the same rate as their White female counterparts (NCES, 2011). For instance, White women graduate at a rate of 75.3% in six years compared to African American women graduating at 46.1% in the same span of time; indicating a 29% gap between Black and White women in the rate of graduation (NCES, 2011). Because African American undergraduate women may feel a sense of academic and social isolation on a predominantly White campus, due to their numerical minority status and therefore have a lower level of engagement in collegiate activities (Davis, 1991), it is necessary to capture the perceived benefits of engagement from African American undergraduate women in their own voices.

**Statement of the Problem**

Student engagement literature suggests that student participation in purposeful educational activities, such as studying, self-regulated learning, and application of learning strategies in college will positively influence educational gains by all students (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Kuh, Kinzie,& Schuh, Whitt, et al., 2005; Lester, 2005; Pace, 1985; Tinto, 1993). However, it is difficult to identify which engagement practices are
more influential to African American undergraduate women’s success because most recent research literature written about student engagement centers on White, middle-class students or African American males (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Gender demographics of the nation’s colleges and universities are changing. As stated earlier, more African American women are enrolling and matriculating through higher education than ever before (Aud, 2011; NCES, 2011). When one considers the historical fact that the nation’s colleges and universities were originally established for men (Fleming, 1984) and that African American women now occupy spaces that were not originally intended for their participation, the importance of understanding how personal experiences influence their engagement, becomes more urgent. African American Undergraduate Women (AAUW) frequently encounter the consequences of racism and sexism that are often manifested in academic settings (Banks, 2009). The lived experiences by AAUW are often depicted from a deficit laden perspective. Because a deficit laden perspective has been used concerning their academic achievement that often leads to drop-out and poor academic performance, it is important to add to the literature a more positive aspect of Black women’s academic achievement. By documenting their experiences, and recording and listening to their stories of engagement and success, as told through their own voices; this study serves to be an informative endeavor. Stories of AAUW who are highly successful at an elite predominantly White university as told by the women themselves serves to fulfill that goal. This study is important because researchers must discover and document the lived experiences of AAUW in order to address the obstacles they encounter in their pursuit of academic success.

Although African American undergraduate women are enrolling, persisting, and achieving academically, there is much to be learned about their experiences, especially
with the scarcity of research that explores their engagement in college (Chambers & Poock, 2011; Walpole, 2009). While there has been research undertaken concerning the role of race and/or gender and how they influence women students’ acclimation to college, often times, such studies include numerous populations of women (e.g. Asian American, Asian Pacific Islander, Latinas, Native American and White). Little is known about the unique experiences of women of color\(^3\) as it pertains to African American women (Melendez & Melendez, 2010).

Transition experiences of AAUW to their new environment of college life are often difficult and might be met with apprehension. Specifically, the literature suggests that the new experiences encountered by African American undergraduate women (AAUW) to college environments are particularly challenging because some AAUW may not be situated in a social space that are considered privilege and one of power. Banks (2009) states that “. . . Black undergraduate women may occupy the bottom rungs on ladders of privilege and power; causing navigation both literally and figuratively through college and university an ongoing, dynamic, and complex process” (p. 9). Nevertheless, regardless of social location, engagement isolation, personal and environmental challenges, the women in this study were able to consistently keep a high level of academic achievement. Since there are few studies that focus on AAUW and none that focus on AAUW and engagement using a qualitative approach, this study is necessary to illuminate the individual and collective experiences of Black women in order to determine their perceptions on how engagement influences their success in college.

---

\(^3\) Women of Color will be used interchangeably with under-represented minority women, which include African American, Asian American, Latina, Native American and Pacific Islander students.
Summary

The acclimation of African American undergraduate women (AAUW) to college may be particularly challenging to them because they are not usually coming from a social background that is diverse in their neighborhoods or high schools. Additionally, their schools did not afford them many financial or academic resources. With the current discourse promoting the importance of using a non-deficit approach to examine the experiences of African American students (Harper & Quaye, 2009; 2012), my research study uses a non-deficit (Banks, 2009; Harper, 2012) approach (focusing on successes rather than failure) to put emphasis on African American undergraduate women who are doing well academically at a predominantly White elite institution. By doing so, I was able to describe what practices these women perceive to have benefitted their academic success. Furthermore, this study is necessary to illuminate the individual and collective experiences of Black women in order to determine their perceptions of how engagement influences their academic achievement in college. Two theoretical frameworks, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) and Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) will be used in data analysis. Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) suggests that Black women share in a historical, sociopolitical experience in the United States. The ways in which Black women experience racial and gender oppression has been shaped by the dominant culture’s influence on social views, roles, and expectations of these women. African American women used a counter perspective to the dominant culture’s perception of them by voicing a counter narrative on the experiences of African American women.

Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) has evolved from Astin’s (1984) Student Involvement Theory. Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984) proposes that “learning increases when a student(s) is/are involved in the academic and social aspects of college life” (p. 307). Engagement Theory differs from Student Involvement Theory by putting the
on us not only on the student(s), but on the university to provide an atmosphere and
resources in which a student can thrive and participate in enriching educational
experiences. Engagement theorist postulates that student engagement in enriching
educational experiences fosters academic success for all students (Kuh, et al., 2005).
Since the AAUW in this study have achieved academic success, it is important to
understand if their success is influenced by their current practices and understandings of
student engagement.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions
of academic and social experiences of African American undergraduate women at the
University of California, Joplin. Specifically, the study investigated the perceptions of their
academic and social engagement practices that they employed to achieve academically
in college. For this study, academic achievement was defined as achieving a cumulative
grade point average (G.P.A.) of 3.0 or higher, being involved in programs, clubs or
organizations both on and/or off campus, and continuous enrollment in school from
semester to semester and year-to-year (i.e. persistence).

The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What are African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of their academic
   and social engagement practices at University of California, Joplin (UC Joplin)?
2. How do these practices shape their experiences and academic success on campus?
3. How can these women’s experiences inform the academic achievement discourse
   regarding ways to improve the educational outcomes of historically underrepresented
   students?

4 Academic engagement is being defined as the time and effort students put into academic activities that lead to
desired outcomes (e.g. studying, faculty-student research, class discussions, collaborating with other students
about coursework) (Kuh et al., 2005). Social engagement is being defined as a process of building connections
between students and others from which meaningful relationships emerge (Rendon & Munoz, 2011).
Personal Relevance

As an African American woman, former educator, counselor and administrator in K-16 settings, I am committed to the education and success of all students, especially underrepresented students (e.g. Black women) across the P-16 educational continuum. A limited amount of research has been conducted, until the last five years, on this particular population of students. My investigation of academic and social engagement practices that these women perceive to be beneficial to their high academic success will contribute to the current literature on this population and assist other undergraduate women of color with developing and/or adopting practices that may foster their academic achievement and could inform the academic achievement discourse regarding improvement of educational outcomes of historically underrepresented students.

I became interested in this topic while doing preliminary research on African American college students and the influence of outreach programs on their academic and social integration into college. I searched the literature and found that most studies concerning this population were quantitative and focused on African American students in general or African American men only. I found a limited number of recent qualitative studies solely investigating African American Undergraduate women (AAUW) and their realities and lived experiences at highly selective predominantly white institutions. I did not find a qualitative study that spoke to African American undergraduate women’s academic and social engagement practices and the relationship these practices had on their academic achievement.

Because of the connection of this study to my personal experience as an AAUW and the lack of recent research concerning engagement and African American women on predominantly White campuses, I felt it was important to explain my realities and position as the researcher in this study.
Black feminist intellectuals, then, function like intermediary groups. On the one hand, they are very much in touch with their own and their confidants’ experiences as a disenfranchised group; on the other hand, they are also in touch with intellectual heritages, diverse groups, and broader social justice issues (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 7).

I am a high achieving African American woman and college student. Additionally, I am a product of predominantly White schools and universities. My schooling life, engagement practices and experiences and academic achievement are emblematic of the women I chose to solicit feedback from in this study.

Therefore, I present my personal relevance to my study as threefold. First, I speak about my own engagement practices in my past and present educational settings. Second, I talk about my professional career. Third, I speak about my two African American daughters’ college schooling lives.

Personal Engagement Practices

Becoming engaged in the life of the college and community was second nature to me for as long as I can remember. I had been an engaged student in middle and high school. I served on student council, active in the National Honor Society, Future Homemakers of America, and the Thespian club. In addition, I was chosen to be a student assistant to my counselor and Business teacher as a high school senior, because I had met all but two of my graduation requirements and needed to fill hours in the day at school. It was natural for me to keep the same mode of behavior when I entered college.

In undergraduate and graduate school, I still chose to be engaged in class and extra-curricular activities. At times, I found myself to be the only African American female in my classes. For example, after returning to school to pursue a Ph.D., I was the lone African American woman in my cohort of nine people. I readily engaged in class
discussions, projects, worked with cohort members of other races, met with and interacted positively with my professors. However, I was always conscious of my oneness in a group of others unlike myself. I mention these experiences above to demonstrate how my academic and social engagement in and out of the classroom has been mixed with enthusiasm and loneliness. The most recent educational engagement activity in which I participated was the first annual Education Leadership and Policy Studies steering committee. I was the sole African American woman on the committee. As I looked at the membership composition of the committee and its lack of diversity, I was reminded of earlier experiences of my academic and social engagement throughout my educational career.

As I reflect on my own undergraduate experiences, I can vividly remember as though it were yesterday how I was able, although sometimes struggling, to achieve success in college. Just as some scholars have maintained that engagement in social organizations and clubs are beneficial to African American students on college campuses (Collins, 2009; Fleming, 1983; Harper, 2008; Kuh, 2008; Mitchell, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), I found this to be true. For example, one social type organization that existed on college campuses was Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs). While my affiliation in a Black Greek Letter Organization came later on in my educational career, I was academically and socially engaged in college although not participating in a BGLO. These organizations [BGLO] were homogeneous in make-up although they allowed open access to cross-racial engagement or cross-racial membership for students other than those who self-identified as being African American. I had always had experiences and engaged in cross-racial interactions in my educational career before entering college. In high school, students of all races and genders worked collaboratively when assigned to do so by our teachers and at times students self-selected to work with
each other in cross-gender and cross-race academic groups. The engagement activities and practices I employed became common place, for our schools were integrated in the late sixties and seventies without incident. If any animosity was shown towards me by my White peers, I was fortunate to have the resilience and self-efficacy instilled in me by my parents to engage with many groups and have the self-confidence that I could excel in whatever undertaking I chose. I realized that after leaving my high school in a small town, that none of my White female friends and I shared any classes in common or lived in the same residence hall. The university that eight of us all attended was a large predominantly White public university in a Southeastern part of the United States. I wonder if we had been afforded more opportunities to engage with one another in college, how our engagement would have unfolded, as we are in contact with one another now some 40 years after graduating from postsecondary education.

I am often on college campuses and in classrooms all over the United States, viewing settings currently with the many factions and splintering of women’s association with one another, it saddens me to see how far we have come as African American women in our engagement practices and yet we have a long way to go. Using the same engagement practices I had used in high school and because I had a positive self-concept and was always confident in my own abilities, I participated in various university activities that were multi-racially composed. These engagement activities included swimming with special needs students, academic tutoring, classroom projects, residence hall activities, and religiously affiliated events. However, outside the classroom, it was unusual for women of different races to engage with each other socially where the activity did not have a relationship to a particular academic class. Moreover, collaborative engagement in college differed from any previous academic and social experiences I had. On a very rare occasion I would study with someone of another race, or be asked to
join a diverse group working in the classroom. Although I was asked questions many times by my White classmates about assignments given in class and the homework, they always did so in a secretive manner in order not to draw attention to our interchange.

As I reflected on my career as a student and educator, I began to wonder to what extent my achievement was due to academic and social engagement, or if I would have achieved just as well had I not become involved in activities. In recent conversations with other AAUW, colleagues and friends, we pondered what engagement activities influenced our academic achievement most in college. The consensus was that we all enjoyed classes where the professors were open-minded, included all students in class discussions, and valued all students’ opinions. Additionally, we felt validated by professors who saw us out of class and acknowledged us by saying “hello.” Some professors were caring enough to ask how things were going and offered help through office hours without sounding condescending. Consequently, we all agreed that we excelled in those classes regardless of the content.

Professional Career

In my professional career that has spanned more than three decades; I have witnessed how African American undergraduate women (AAUW) have engaged in activities inside and outside of classrooms. While I interacted on a regular basis with Black women in high school and college settings, it appeared that these women often retreated to their own cells. The quest for inclusiveness is lacking for some factions of our college’s female population. Sadly the same topics of conversation that researchers have mentioned three decades ago still resonate in today’s conversations with AAUW. Having first-hand experience with this phenomenon made me aware of how far AAUW have come in the academy, and yet how far we still have to go.
I have held positions as a Lecturer, Counselor, Academic Adviser, and Assistant Director for Engineering Minority Programs at a four-year Ivy League institution. While serving in those positions, I witnessed first-hand the isolation felt by some AAUW. For instance, these women typically worked in classroom groups together, frequented the dining halls together, and came to meet with me in friendship groups to discuss a myriad of topics. I seldom witnessed even the most academically capable women working in diverse groups of women and men, or being invited to participate in racially diverse groups. These women would comment on professors who they perceived to be racist or non-racist. When I asked why they held these perceptions, they would often remark, “I didn’t get the same points on my paper as another non-African American student” (personal communication, 2000). Comments from other students would include the thought that the professors, male or female, made them feel inferior by questioning their reason for choosing difficult majors such as sciences, nursing, and engineering. Very often these students commented that their advisers tried to dissuade their pursuing these fields of study.

Not all African American women fare well in the U.S. society, especially in relation to their educational and social trajectories. Also, for those women who are successful, they still encounter roadblocks and find unique ways to deal with the challenges they face on their journey to and/or through college. I chose to focus on successful college women rather than focus on Black women who have dropped out of college. The reason I chose academically successful Black women is because their voices are lacking in the discourse about the impact of engagement at an elite (PWI).

**A Connection to My Daughters’ College Realities**

As the mother of two African American women who have successfully matriculated through predominantly White institutions and received their master’s
degrees, I have frequent conversations with them about their college experiences. As I listen to them reflect on their academic and social realities inside and outside the classroom, it is like Deja vous. Some of the same topics resurface as noted in research studies over the course of the last three decades (i.e. faculty expectations, classroom hostility, etc.). My daughters comment that students of the same race had a tendency to work in the same groups. White men were the most vocal in class and most noticed and attended to by the professor. They also described how some of the White women seemed to resent these men for being outspoken and dominating the lecture. It is interesting; however, like my experiences as an undergraduate, they too were often asked questions about the class lesson and clarification of homework assignments in a similarly private manner.

My own undergraduate experiences mirrored some of the same engagement practices of present day African American undergraduate women. Although not overt, I experienced subtle forms of racism within the context of academic and social engagement activities. There was cross-racial interaction between women; mostly women were either Black or White. I too spent most of my time being involved in academic endeavors in order to graduate from college early. I do believe that my academic and social engagement practices inside and outside of the classroom had a direct influence on my academic achievement.

African American men and women are often grouped as monolithic; their experiences have not been disaggregated to amplify the voices of women whether on HBCUs or PWIs. This practice of using aggregated group data does not adequately portray how being a Black women produces another layer of oppression in an already raced and classed context. Although there is some information about the influence of academic and social experiences in and out of class at the college level and how
discussions about these experiences affect all students (Kuh, 2009), there is a very small amount of information in contemporary literature about the factors that influence the academic and social engagement practices of African American women who are academically successful in elite, undergraduate settings (Robinson & Franklin, 2011). Because the engagement experiences, practices, challenges, and successes of these women are not well known, this research study could highlight institutional strategies that are beneficial and/or detrimental to their academic and social successes. Findings from this study also entail recommendations about ways to improve the engagement of African American undergraduate women at elite PWIs.

**Research Goals**

More research studies are needed to focus closely on the academic and social engagement of African American undergraduate women (AAUW). An exploration into how these women achieve academically and the interrelatedness of their engagement activities in and out of class, particularly at an elite predominantly White institution, is important. Without the incorporation of voices of high achieving AAUW and their engagement practices in postsecondary education, a deficit perspective will remain a focal point of literature concerning this population of students.

The major goals of my study were to explore: (1) the perceptions of African American undergraduate women concerning their academic and social experiences in college, at a predominantly White university, (2) how their engagement experiences differ from their same race male peers, White women, and other women of color, (3) how their engagement in and out of class has influenced their academic achievement, and (4) how this study will contribute to research to inform practice and policies at higher education institutions to better serve African American women in higher education.
Studies undertaken during the 1990’s by researchers (Allen, 1992; Flemings, 1984; Gurin & Epps, 1975) raised themes that are echoed in some of the present studies about the experiences of AAUW reported by (Chambers & Poock, 2011; Gasman, 2009; Kennedy, 2012; Walpole, 2009). It is important that the conversation continues about this population of students and their perceptions of how they achieve academic success. A review of the literature illuminates that academic and social engagement practices remains stagnant for these women. It is my hope that the information gleaned from this study on African American undergraduate women will contribute to a dialogue about the influence of their academic and social engagement on academic achievement.

Organization of this Dissertation and Summary

This dissertation is organized into eight chapters. In Chapter One, I provide an overview of the problem, especially as it relates to the discourse on the experiences of African American undergraduate women, purpose of the study, research questions, my personal relevance and research goals. In Chapter Two, I discuss relevant literature related to African American Undergraduate women in higher education, institutional climate and characteristics and African American women’s achievement, majority and minority serving institutions and single-sex and coed institutions as these institutions concern the achievement of women. I discuss the importance of student engagement, student engagement as a mitigating factor against negative events that occur for students, faculty-student interaction, and social and academic engagement of African American students and African American undergraduate women in particular. In Chapter Three, I describe the Engagement Theory (Kuh, et al., 2005) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000; 2009) I use for this study. In Chapter Four I discuss my research design, which includes the research approach, methodology, site, sample, recruitment strategies, data collection and analysis procedures, and trustworthiness. In this chapter, I also
shared information about my role as a researcher. Chapters five, six, and seven detail the demographic and educational background information about the participants and findings and analysis of my study. Finally, Chapter eight discusses implications for future study, practice and policy. I end my dissertation with concluding thoughts and lessons learned while engaging in this project. All of the recruitment letters; consent forms, demographic questionnaires, photography activity prompt and interview protocols can be found in the appendices.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, I summarize information concerning the experiences of African American women in four-year institutions and their presence, and actions in U.S. higher education. A description of institutional and environmental characteristics that impact their achievement is also explored (Allen, 1992; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Rosales & Person, 2003; Zamani, 2003). Additionally, an overview of the importance of student engagement practices at higher education institutions, and African American women’s student engagement practices is summarized (Harper, Carini, Hayek & Bridges, 2004; Schwartz & Washington, 2007). Finally, I describe the gaps in the literature concerning African American undergraduate women’s engagement practices that influence their academic achievement (Chambers & Poock, 2011). Therefore, this study will contribute to literature concerning the academic and social engagement practices of these women and the perceived impact these practices have on their academic achievement in college.

African American Undergraduate Women in American Higher Education

A number of scholars posit that there is a need for research that explores and highlights the strategies that African American college women use to successfully accomplish their goals in postsecondary education (Banks, 2009; Bowman, Cureton, Mellum, Alacron, Altareb, & Valtinson, 1995; Elise & Rolison, 2003; Fleming, 1983; Franklin & Robinson, 2011; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Elise and Rolison (2003), Patton and McClure (2009), and Stewart (2009) have noted that African American women are very conscious of the multiple identities they possess and that are interconnected with their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1993) meaning, they possess multiple identities of oppression, of race as an African American and gender as a woman on campus. As a result, they are sensitive to the alienation and
isolation that they experience in academic and social engagement activities. African American women reported concerns about issues such as not being integrated into the life and culture of the campus at their institutions and failed relationships with their male counterparts (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Additionally, they report anxiety about their beliefs that they are invisible in classes and the campus environment at large (Harper, 2008; Jackson, 1998; King, 1988, 1990; Kraft, 1991; Moses, 1989).

At the same time, researchers have found that African American undergraduate women enter higher education with specific and unique needs (Banks, 2009; Howard-Hamilton, 2004). Some needs result from: 1) lack of exposure to college-going culture in the home, 2) engagement with peers that may not be college-bound, 3) apprehension about leaving home for the first time, and 4) encountering diverse groups of people for the first time. Howard-Hamilton (2004) and Collins (2000) note that African American women experience feelings of an outsider within in higher education. As a result of these feelings, they [African American women] report a lack of sensitivity and understanding regarding their culture, alienation, struggling to succeed, and perceived negative faculty attitudes (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis, 2002; Rosales & Person, 2004). Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis (2002) report that students in general who perceive the campus climate to be unwelcoming, are hindered in their ability to develop strategies necessary to fully engage socially and academically in college.

Depending on the type of institution, historically Black college and university, (HBCU) or predominantly White institution (PWI), single-sex or coed institution, there are more African American students and faculty present on college and university campuses today than was the case 20 years ago. Researchers have noted the importance of there being a significant number of faculty, staff, and students who are African American on college campuses to help alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation for African
American women (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, & Pollio, 2004; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patton & Harper, 2003). These faculty and staff members provide support to these women by serving as advisors; surrogate parents, and mentors; sometimes simulating a pseudo-home environment for students that are away from home.

While there are increased numbers and visibility of African American undergraduate women on four-year campuses, they continue to encounter hostile environments rampant with difficult challenges. Some challenges these women encounter are racial micro-aggressions, which are subtle negative acts and language perpetrated toward individuals or groups because of race, gender and/or disability (Pierce, 1970), social isolation by peers and the lack of affirmation by faculty (Mitchell, 2000; Moses, 1989; Patton and McClure 2009; Robinson & Tucker, 1998; Solórzano & Ceja, 2000; Turner, 2001). While college campuses have a significant number of African American women enrolled, issues of managing perceptions held by others and avoiding stereotypes continue to be problems (Hayes, 2012; Robinson & Tucker, 1998; Walpole, 2009). African American undergraduate women continue to confront and work through stereotypes such as those related to physical attributes, emotional stability, intellectual ability, and economic status (Robinson & Tucker, 1998).

Despite the significant progress made by African American women in college enrollment in degree granting institutions, their persistent, continuous enrollment in each successive semester, and achieving an academic G.P.A. that is needed to remain in good standing and degree attainment (i.e. graduating from the institution with a bachelor’s degree), there exist a dearth of information in the research literature that describes and builds upon their experiences and success in higher education (Miller, 2012; Robinson & Franklin, 2011). Sharing the accomplishments of these women could
help to improve the college environment for other African American women, particularly those students enrolled at elite, PWI (Benton, 2001; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Kraft, 1991; Morgan, 2007; Rosales & Person, 2004; Strayhorn, 2008).

Notwithstanding the reality of perceived hostilities on campus, research indicates that cohorts of African American female students have been able to productively navigate campus milieu at PWIs to be successful in achieving their academic goals (Elise & Rolison, 2003; Harper et al., 2004; Robinson & Tucker, 1998). The continued existence of stereotypes through which African American undergraduate women have worked to achieve their successes underscores urgency of the need for investigation of how they are able to be academically successful. An investigation into their engagement helps to concentrate research attention on them. A sole focus on these women will foster a better understanding of the experiences that encouraged their engagement in the academic and social life during college and the influence this engagement has on their academic achievement. Although they have encountered and confronted challenges in and outside of the classroom, they have found ways to combat negativity and have progressed toward positive academic achievement.

A number of scholars posit that there is a need for research that explores and highlights the strategies that African American college women use to successfully accomplish their goals in postsecondary education (Banks, 2009; Bowman, Cureton, Mellum, Alacron, Altareb, & Valtinson, 1995; Elise & Rolison, 2003; Fleming, 1983; Franklin & Robinson, 2011; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Elise and Rolison (2003), Patton and McClure (2009), and Stewart (2009) have noted that African American women are very conscious of the multiple identities they possess and that are interconnected with their intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1993) meaning, they possess multiple identities of oppression, of race as an African American
and gender as a woman on campus. As a result, they are sensitive to the alienation and isolation that they experience in academic and social engagement activities. African American women reported concerns about issues such as not being integrated into the life and culture of the campus at their institutions and failed relationships with their male counterparts (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Additionally, they report anxiety about their beliefs that they are invisible in classes and the campus environment at large (Harper, 2008; Jackson, 1998; King, 1988, 1990; Kraft, 1991; Moses, 1989).

At the same time, researchers have found that African American undergraduate women enter higher education with specific and unique needs (Banks, 2009). Some needs result from: 1) lack of exposure to college-going culture in the home, 2) engagement with peers that may not be college-bound, 3) apprehension about leaving home for the first time, and 4) encountering diverse groups of people for the first time. Howard-Hamilton (2004) and Collins (2000) note that African American women experience feelings of an outsider within in higher education. As a result of these feelings, they [African American women] report a lack of sensitivity and understanding regarding their culture, alienation, struggling to succeed, and perceived negative faculty attitudes (Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, & Lewis, 2002; Rosales & Person, 2004). Constantine, Wilton, Gainor, and Lewis (2002) report that students in general who perceive the campus climate to be unwelcoming, are hindered in their ability to develop strategies necessary to fully engage socially and academically in college.

Depending on the type of institution, historically Black college and university, (HBCU) or predominantly White institution (PWI), single-sex or coed institution, there are more African American students and faculty present on college and university campuses today than was the case 20 years ago. Researchers have noted the importance of there being a significant number of faculty, staff, and students who are African American on
college campuses to help alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation for African American women (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, & Pollio, 2004; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patton & Harper, 2003). These faculty and staff members provide support to these women by serving as advisors; surrogate parents, and mentors; sometimes simulating a pseudo-home environment for students that are away from home.

While there are increased numbers and visibility of African American undergraduate women on four-year campuses, they continue to encounter hostile environments rampant with difficult challenges. Some challenges these women encounter are racial micro-aggressions, which are subtle negative acts and language perpetrated toward individuals or groups because of race, gender and/or disability (Pierce, 1970), social isolation by peers and the lack of affirmation by faculty (Mitchell, 2000; Moses, 1989; Patton and McClure 2009; Robinson & Tucker, 1998; Solórzano & Ceja, 2000; Turner, 2001). While college campuses have a significant number of African American women enrolled, issues of managing perceptions held by others and avoiding stereotypes continue to be problems (Hayes, 2012; Robinson & Tucker, 1998; Walpole, 2009). African American undergraduate women continue to confront and work through stereotypes such as those related to physical attributes, emotional stability, intellectual ability, and economic status (Robinson & Tucker, 1998).

Despite the significant progress made by African American women in college enrollment in degree granting institutions, their persistent, continuous enrollment in each successive semester, and achieving an academic G.P.A. that is needed to remain in good standing and degree attainment (i.e. graduating from the institution with a bachelor’s degree), there exist a dearth of information in the research literature that describes and builds upon their experiences and success in higher education (Miller,
Notwithstanding the reality of perceived hostilities on campus, research indicates that cohorts of African American female students have been able to productively navigate campus milieu at PWIs to be successful in achieving their academic goals (Elise & Rolison, 2003; Harper et al., 2004; Robinson & Tucker, 1998). The continued existence of stereotypes through which African American undergraduate women have worked to achieve their successes underscores urgency of the need for investigation of how they are able to be academically successful. An investigation into their engagement helps to concentrate research attention on them. A sole focus on these women will foster a better understanding of the experiences that encouraged their engagement in the academic and social life during college and the influence this engagement has on their academic achievement. Although they have encountered and confronted challenges in and outside of the classroom, they have found ways to combat negativity and have progressed toward positive academic achievement.

**Institutional Characteristics and Environments and African American Women’s Achievement**

Campus characteristics and environments, such as historically Black colleges and universities, predominantly White institutions, single-sex or co-ed institutions, have been discussed as important dimensions of the student experience (Allen, 1992; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Jackson, 1998; Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer & Umbach, 2007; Rosales & Person, 2003; Sedlacek, 1987). The importance of the diversity of the student body on campus has been noted as an important contributor to student achievement.
(Harper & Patton, 2003; Kraft, 1991; Walpole, 2009). Moreover, the racial and gender composition of the institution plays a key role in African American women’s college achievement and ultimate success (Allen, 1992; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Rosales & Person, 2003; Zamani, 2003).

Allen’s (1992) study revealed that campus racial/ethnic composition is correlated with factors such as academic achievement, social integration, and professional aspirations. A number of investigations indicate that African American women report having higher self-confidence and better grades than their male counterparts at PWIs (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Jackson, 1998; Von Robertson et al., 2005). Fleming (1984) maintains that African American women on PWIs developed their intellectual skills more than on HBCUs, and Jackson (1998) found that African American women on PWI’s focused on developing their racial identity as opposed to their gender identity. She attributed this fact to PWIs focusing support either on women or African American students but not on students that were both. The previous section detailed information regarding African American undergraduate women’s participation in higher educational settings and the impact institutional climates had on their achievement. The next section will discuss the types of institutional environments, PWI and HBCU, where AAUW matriculated. The section discusses how their engagement contributed their achieving academic success.

**Predominantly White Institutions vs. Historically Black Colleges and Universities**

Most students find that entering and being in college to be a new and sometimes stressful event. However, African American women in particular, experience additional stressors at predominantly White institutions (Jackson, 1998; Jones, 2004; Walpole, 2009). Jackson (1998), Jones (2004), and Walpole (2009) attribute some of these stressors to perceived climate of hostility, lack of rapport with faculty, inadequate social
integration into the life of the campus, and failure in their academic endeavors. A number of authors have done comparative studies between HBCUs and PWIs and found that African American students, to include women, evidence different patterns of engagement and show different academic achievement outcomes (Allen, 1992; Astin, 1984; Fleming, 1984, Harper & Quaye, 2009).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were established to provide educational opportunities for African Americans seeking postsecondary enrollment (Anderson, 1988). Research suggest that HBCUs offer supportive and nurturing environments where African American students in general are more confident, more likely to be more engaged in campus events, and have a better relationship with faculty than African Americans students at predominantly White institutions (Allen, 1992; Astin, 1977; Constantine, 1995; Fleming, 1984; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Zamani, 2003).

For more than three decades, campus climate and racial and gender composition research has noted the influence of the environment on African American students and women's experience (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Guffrida, 2004; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Kim & Sax, 2007; Tinto, 1993; Von Robertson et al., 2005). Studies suggest that African American men and women perform differently at HBCU than they do at PWI. Black men and women perform differently on these campuses, and engagement practices differ on HBCU and PWI for women (Harper et al., 2004; Von Robertson, Mitra, & Van Delinder, 2005). Some of the differences of experiences and engagement practices findings vary from various authors reporting on women's engagement practices. As noted by Allen (1992), Black men were more confident and assertive in the classroom at HBCU, whereas Black women were less assertive at HBCU and more assertive in the classroom at PWI. There exists a body of literature that documents the greater satisfaction and success of African American students attending HBCU than at PWI (Allen, 1992;
Fleming, 1984; Gurin & Epps, 1975). Guiffrida (2004) asserts that African American students in general have higher achievement and graduate at higher rates than their same race peers who attend PWI. Likewise, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) affirm that existing evidence is consistent with the notion of the supportive institutional environment common among HBCU, which provides a more effective educational experience for African American students. Additionally, Allen (1992) suggests that HBCUs “enroll students who otherwise might not be able to attend college because of social, financial, or academic barriers” (p. 28). This statement illuminates the historical and present importance of HBCUs to African American students’ access to postsecondary education.

Satisfaction reported by students who attend HBCUs is attributed to factors such as feelings of greater unity and engagement with their African American peers, connections with the campus, and nurturing and support received from faculty (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Harper et. al., 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strayhorn, 2008). However, some literature speaks to the advantages and disadvantages for African American women at HBCUs and their successes compared to how they fare academically and socially at PWIs (Bowman et al., 1995; Elise & Rolison, 2003; Fleming, 1983; Jackson, 1998; Kraft, 1991; Seldacek, 1987; Zamani, 2003).

Seminal studies found in the literature concerning African American college students were conducted by Gurin and Epps (1975), Fleming (1984), and Allen, (1992). These researchers investigated the experiences of African American students at HBCUs and PWIs. Although their focus was to understand the experiences of Black collegians at HBCUs and PWIs, they also wanted to understand how gender differences affected African American students at the various institutions. These studies looked at African American men and women. The purposes of the studies were to investigate how institutional factors, such as racial composition of the campus, influenced individual
student outcomes that impacted their success. Another purpose of the studies was to explore whether campus racial composition fosters students’ academic achievement and/or increases student comfort in the campus environment. Finally, studies sought to ascertain if racial make-up of the institution presents academic and social obstacles that impede student success (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Harper et al., 2004).

Gurin and Epps (1975) were among the first researchers to investigate differences in gender among males and females at HBCUs. The researchers used data from 5,000 African American students encompassing the years 1964-1975 and were enrolled in HBCUs. Their research revealed that females were more disadvantaged than males on HBCU campuses. For example, they reported that females aspired to more traditional jobs as teaching, nursing and secretarial positions when compared to men who aspired to graduate and professional school. They concluded that Black women gained less status by attending college than did Black men. They found that black women on HBCUs were more anxious in competition, felt less competent, and tended to be less assertive than males.

Fleming’s (1984) findings agreed with the Gurin and Epps’ (1975) assessment of African American undergraduate women at HBCUs. She later studied 3,000 Black students at HBCUs and PWIs. The findings indicated that African American students have better psychological adjustment at HBCUs than they possessed at PWIs. She reports that on PWIs, White males benefitted more than Black and White females in terms of academic success, social participation, assertiveness, satisfaction, and psychological adjustment (Fleming, 1984). The author further theorized that at HBCUs, Black males evidenced profiles similar to White males at PWIs. Fleming (1984) concluded that Black men at HBCUs were advantaged in social, academic and leadership areas similar to their peers at PWIs. These findings prompted her to conclude
that college was a setting designed to accommodate the needs of men, and where women gained fewer advantages (Fleming, 1984; Von Robertson, Mitra, & Van DeLinder, 2005). Conversely, at PWIs, African American undergraduate women were more assertive, and gained more cognitively from the college experience than Black males. Findings also indicated that African American women found it necessary to create their own social and cultural networks in order to achieve a level of comfort that supported their successful achievement in college (Fleming, 1984).

Allen’s (1992) quantitative study investigated student outcomes of 1,800 Black students, 928 from HBCUs and 872 from PWIs, related to academic achievement, social involvement, and occupational aspirations. The researcher used a questionnaire to collect data from male and female students, including freshmen through seniors. The findings indicated that students attending HBCUs reported higher academic achievement than their peers attending PWIs. The results indicated that students at HBCUs reported higher levels of social involvement, higher grades, and more favorable relations with their professors. The opposite was true for students attending PWIs. The study was not focused solely on African American undergraduate women however; Allen (1992) emphasized that participants at PWIs reported significantly lower occupational aspirations that were below their qualifications. He also posited that of all problems faced by Black students on PWIs; those arising from isolation, alienation, and lack of support were noted as the most serious. In addition, he also found that students who were academically successful at HBCUs had positive relationships with faculty and had higher grades.

Fries-Britt (2002) agreed with previous findings of other studies in her investigation of high-achieving black collegians. She asserts that high-achieving African-American undergraduate men and women attending PWIs reported lower levels of social
involvement and less positive connections with their faculty. However, those men and women who felt positive about their relationship and connection to peers of both races had the greatest social involvement.

In a more recent study conducted by Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004) using The College Student Report, researchers investigated gender differences in student engagement among 1,167 African American undergraduates at 12 four-year HBCUs. The findings of this study contradict previous findings of earlier studies conducted by Gurin and Epps (1975), Fleming (1984), and Allen (1992). In a related study, Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004) surveyed 919 women and 248 men, including first year students and seniors, and found differences between men and women in the areas of academic challenge and faculty student interaction. Contrary to previous findings, the results indicated that African American undergraduate women no longer lag behind African American men in academic or social engagement experiences. Consistent with other research, the findings also indicated that women spent more time preparing for class, and worked harder than men to meet faculty expectations (Kraft, 1991; Randall, 2013). Because women are enrolling in higher education in increasing numbers, with HBCUs being no exception, the classroom composition, therefore, reflects this increase in female enrollment and matriculation. Consequently, females are more assertive in the classroom and are also choosing major fields that have been traditionally chosen by males (Harper, et al., 2004).

Schwartz and Washington’s (2007) quantitative study surveyed 213 first year African American freshmen females at a private HBCU in the Southeast. The Non-Cognitive Questionnaire developed by Tracey and Sedlacek (1984) was used as the survey instrument. Students were required to respond to 20 items using a Likert-type scale that measures college expectations, self-assessment, and educational aspirations.
Students also responded to two open-ended questions relating to their academic goals and accomplishments. The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions women had about their readiness and preparation for college. The responses from the surveys were compared with students’ actual performance and retention during their first year of college (Schwartz & Washington, 2007). The findings indicated the best predictors of academic success for these women were: “high school rank, personal emotional adjustment, availability of a strong support person; with high school grade point average and social adjustment being correlated to academic success” (p. 38). The ability to adjust to the academic environment and receive support from a strong supportive person echoes the sentiments of Tinto’s (1987) model of student integration.

Gasman’s (2009) review of historical and contemporary chronology of African American women’s participation at HBCUs maintains that the campus climate and environment caused some disengagement on the part of African American college women. The reason was thought to lie in the patriarchal system that was instituted at these colleges from their founding. There was a double standard for men and women. Men were allowed to go and come at liberty while women were escorted about campus when they left their residence halls (Gasman, 2009). Gasman’s review coincides with previous research conducted more than two decades earlier where Fleming (1984) stated that college was a place intended for males.

Summary

Over a period of three decades research concerning African American women on college campuses has centered on this population at HBCUs, HBCUs compared to PWIs, and Single-Sex versus Co-ed Institutions. Findings from these studies revealed that African American undergraduate women at HBCUs at one time did not aspire to jobs that were high level. In Harper et. al.’s (2004) study of engagement differences at HBCUs,
they found that women no longer lagged behind African American men in their career aspirations. Just as Fleming (1984) suggested that college was a place for men more than women, Gasman (2009) reported that men were afforded more liberties in the college environment than women were. Given the reality that racial and gender composition of campuses affected women’s achievement, studies indicated that the best predictors of academic achievement in college was high school rank, having a strong support network or strong person in the school environment, and the ability to adjust socially to the environment.

**Historically Black Colleges and Universities vs Predominantly White Institutions**

Results from a study by Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Kluken, and Pollio (2004) agrees with the findings of previous research concerning how African American undergraduates report feelings of coldness in classrooms and isolation on campus at PWIs (Cabrera, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999; Davis et al., 2004; Flemings, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Von Robertson, Mitra, & Van Delinder, 2005). Therefore, these students do not easily integrate into the campus environment, thus limiting their engagement in and out of class activities. However, there is limited research on social and academic integration, engagement, and experiences of African American undergraduate women (Robinson & Franklin, 2011; Von Robertson et. al., 2005).

Although African American undergraduate women may have a sense of isolation from their white peers in the classroom, on campus, and the residence hall at PWIs, they have still been able to succeed at the university (Walpole, 1999). Walpole’s (1999) qualitative study using a Bourdiean framework of cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1994) conducted in-depth interviews with 19 high-achieving African American undergraduate women who self-reported their income levels as middle class to upper middle class. Only one student did not have a parent with a postsecondary degree.
Thirteen students had one parent with a bachelor’s degree, and 10 had one parent with a graduate degree. The study was conducted at two of the most elite four-year institutions in the country, based on SAT scores of 1200 or above; based on the highest score of 1600 and focused primarily on undergraduate education (Walpole, 1999). The results indicated that African American undergraduate women experienced significant social challenges. Consistent with previous research conducted by Elise and Rolison, (2003), Fleming (1984), Fries-Britt (2002), and Jackson, (1998), challenges included isolation and rejection based on their race, gender, and social class. Not only do women perform differently in and out of the classroom at majority and minority institutions, elite or tertiary, but literature indicates that the gender composition (single-sex versus co-ed institutions) has an effect on women’s engagement at large (Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, & Umbach, 2007). (are there other paragraph headings? Shouldn’t have just one)

**Single-Sex vs. Co-Ed Institutions**

Student identification with the characteristics of the campus provides the foundation for the student’s comfort with the campus (Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, & Umbach, 2007). This identification with campus characteristics is also the basis from which the student will begin to navigate the campus and the programs and services that exist to support the student’s engagement. This engagement includes interaction with the campus environment and the academic resources that are vital to success in college (Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, & Umbach, 2007; Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007).

Studies show that academic achievement varies by institutional characteristics and environment. Research indicates that women show differences in academic performance depending on their matriculation at single-sex postsecondary institutions, when compared to co-ed institutions (Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, & Umbach, 2007). These authors found that women at single-sex institutions were very engaged in enriching
educational activities, such as interaction with faculty and studying, and reported feeling higher levels of support and greater gains in college. Women of color tended to be less engaged than White students. They also reported that women at single-sex colleges are more engaged than women at coeducational institutions. Women at women’s colleges were more active concerning collaborative learning and were more engaged in faculty-student interactions than their counterparts at coeducational institutions. Similarly, studies report that women perform differently at majority institutions when compared to minority-serving institutions (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Harper et al., 2004; Sedlacek, 1987).

Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, and Umbach (2007) conducted a study in which they compared the experiences of women attending women’s colleges with those of women attending coeducational institutions. Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a random sample of first-year and senior undergraduate women from 26 women’s colleges and 264 other four-year institutions was obtained. Results indicated that first-year and senior students reported higher levels of academic challenge at women’s colleges. The largest observed difference was related to experiences with diversity. Both first-year and senior students at women’s colleges reported that their campus environment encouraged and supported diverse interactions and an understanding of diversity to a greater degree than women at coeducational schools. First-year students at women’s college perceived greater support for success. Compared with White women, African American women who were seniors reported significantly less support, interpersonal support, and were less satisfied than White women. However, African American women in their first year reported more gains in general education and self-understanding at women’s colleges while African American women who were seniors reported greater gains in their willingness to contribute to the welfare of their community at single-sex institutions.
Single-Sex Institutions

Women enrolled at women’s colleges engage more frequently in effective educational practices at levels that exceed those of their counterparts at coeducational institutions. Women’s colleges create a climate where women are encouraged to realize their potential and become involved in various facets of campus life, inside and outside the classroom (Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, & Umbach, 2007). The high levels of academic challenge found at women’s colleges appears to be a reflection of taking women seriously, in that African American women are experiencing high expectations for student performance and are deeply engaged in intellectual and creative activities. Given that the enrollment of women of color at women’s colleges continues to rise, with the largest increase being African American women (Guy-Sheftall, 1995), it would be advantageous for women’s colleges to attend to the climate for learning on their campuses for students of color. Historically Black women’s colleges, which have a history of producing high proportions of successful graduates (Guy-Sheftall, 1995), should be examined as institutional models to improve the undergraduate experience for African American undergraduate women at predominantly white women’s colleges.

As reported earlier, student engagement has been found to enrich the experiences and outcomes of all students (Kuh et al., 2005) Research details that academic and social engagement by students helps them to achieve academically, gain confidence socially, and interact with a diverse group of students from various ethnic backgrounds (Kuh et al., 2005). However, no qualitative studies exist that detail whether engagement equals positive outcomes for African American undergraduate women. Very few studies of any type exist that result in findings that explain if engagement offsets any of the negative events such as hurtful verbal insults and occurrences of hostility these women encounter (Chambers & Poock, 2011).
Investigators have publicized that engagement benefits all students in college (Astin, 1984; Harper, Kuh et al., 2005; Randall, 2013). The importance of engagement in various activities should be explored in order to understand how engagement practices coalesce to influence the success of African American undergraduate women at a predominantly White university.

Summary

African American undergraduate women can be found on a variety of campus types—HBCUs, PWIs, co-ed, and single-sex. It is important to explore the impact of the campus environment on the engagement of these women. Engagement both academically and socially for these women proceed in a manner that differs from Black men and other non-Black women. Additionally, the way in which these women encounter the student body and faculty have a direct effect on their comfort and academic achievement.

Research has suggested the benefits of engagement include higher achievement by students and their increased comfort within the institution. The next section will discuss the importance of student engagement in the college environment of African American undergraduate women inside and outside the classroom spaces. The importance of faculty-student interaction and engagement in social organizations will be explored.

The Importance of Student Engagement Practices

Over the course of three decades, Astin's (1984) theory of involvement has been the basis of research on the benefits of engagement for college students. According to Astin (1984), students who get involved in college academic and social activities are positively affected by their engagement with peers and faculty. Specifically, they exhibit gain in cognitive learning and in their comfort with the institution. Students also gain
knowledge of the college’s resources and how to access them. Students are positively affected in building supportive social and academic networks. A number of researchers indicate that achievement by African American students, including women, is influenced by the type, frequency, and quality of college involvement experiences (Astin, 1984; Harper, 2009; Kuh 2009; Miller, 2012). Kuh (2009) also posit that “student engagement and its historical antecedents—time on task, quality of efforts, and involvement—are supported by decades of research showing positive associations with a range of desired outcomes of college” p. 698). Student engagement is described as “. . . the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1984, p. 297). Other researchers have added to this definition to include interaction that occurs between students and other members of the community, such as faculty, and student classmates as important dimensions of student engagement. Rendon and Munoz (2011) point to the importance of student engagement as a process of building connections between students and others, from which meaningful relationships will emerge. Student engagement has been proven to be an effective strategy for nurturing sustained relationships with faculty and fellow students (Randall, 2013). Student engagement has also been determined to be important to student achievement and other outcomes, such as persistence and educational attainment (Kuh, 2009).

**Academic and Social Engagement**

Academic engagement, those involvements where students interact directly with faculty and participation in classroom and out of class research activities, have been documented as important activities that contribute to student success (Green, Marti, & McClennen, 2008; Hu & Kuh, 2002). Randall (2013) proposes that “. . . student engagement in learning, and especially sustained personal interaction with faculty and
fellow students, is critical to positive outcomes (p. 1). Kuh (2008, 2009) builds upon the importance of academic engagement initiatives as important contributors to student success by adding that, “institutions should seek ways to channel student energy toward educationally effective activities” (2009, p. 688). These actions put the onus on institutions to find ways to engage students and not put the responsibility solely on the student.

Social engagement is also an important dimension of student engagement that contributes to student success in college. Social engagement is the interaction that occurs between students and other members of the campus community, such as faculty, staff and student classmates, in which students build “. . . supporting, caring relationships. . . to validate each other to build a social network through activities. . .” (Rendon & Munoz, 2011, p.19). Similarly, Astin (1984) hypothesizes that students who get involved in college are positively affected in areas that strengthen their cognitive development, social competence, and leadership development.

Researchers found that even minority students who were high achieving scholastically still found themselves with feelings of isolation, alienation, and cultural dissonance on predominantly White campuses (Chavous, 2000; Fries-Britt, 1998, 2002). The loneliness and isolation felt by minority students was particularly evident in studies done on African American women (Chamber & Poock, 2011; Fleming, 1983; Gasman, 1999; Harper, 2008; Kraft, 1991; Schwartz & Washington, 2007; Turner, 2001; Walpole, 1999; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

**Academic and Social Engagement as Mitigating Factors Against Negative Events**

Harper and Quaye (2009) report that students’ disengagement from their college studies could often be the result of a campus climate. The campus climate is often perceived by them to be unwelcoming. The perception of a hostile learning environment
and feelings of isolation inevitably hamper the ability for African American women students to establish fundamental coping strategies necessary to succeed at a PWI. Without appropriate adjustment, engagement can prove more difficult for students. Other researchers have noted challenges that African American undergraduate students have reported, such as feelings of isolation, incidents of disrespect or hostility (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1994; Fries-Britt, 2002; Walpole, 1999). Conversely, studies have reported that engagement by students in academic and social dimensions help them to overcome negative events that they experience in college, such as bad grades, lack of friends, and incidents perceived as unwelcoming (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005). Research suggests that student engagement benefits all students regardless of their personal backgrounds, while noting that some students may benefit more from certain activities (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005).

Chambers and Poock (2011) conducted a quantitative study to explore whether engagement had a positive influence on the experience for African American undergraduate women. The researchers used 2009-2010 data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) Custom Report Generator. The purpose of the study was to analyze engagement practices of more than 6,613 African American undergraduate women compared to African American men and their women peers. The benchmarks used in the study were delineated by gender and race. The racial categories were African American/Black, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian Pacific Islander, Caucasian/White, Hispanic, and Foreigner. The study focused on college seniors who were enrolled full-time, under the age of 28, and not enrolled in a distance education program. The sample consisted of seniors from baccalaureate, master’s and doctoral public and private institutions ranging from small to large student bodies, with 870 four-year institutions within the continental United States. The total number of African
American undergraduate women ranged from 6,613 to 6,625. The findings indicated that African American women were the most engaged in teaching and learning experiences. However, African American women were not more engaged than African American men in this study. African American women were more likely to perceive higher levels of academic challenge than their male peers.

The effect of student engagement on first year college grades and persistence using student level data from the NSSE was examined by Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008). The researchers studied whether engagement in the first year of college had a significant effect on first year grade point average (GPA) and persistence to the second year without taking pre-college experiences into consideration. The effects of engagement were also examined to see if they differed by race and ethnicity and prior academic achievement. Student engagement was defined as time spent studying, time spent in co-curricular activities, and an overall measure of engagement in effective education practices made up of responses to 19 other NSSE items (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Student engagement in educationally purposeful activities was found to be positively related to academic outcomes and persistence to the second year. Exposure to these practices was found to benefit all students academically and aid in persisting to the second year (Kuh, et al., 2008). African American women have unique academic experiences that differ from their same race male peers and White women. These experiences included being the only Black student in a class, being the recipient of subtle comments made by White peers in classrooms and other spaces about campus, being ignored by faculty, and being excluded from clubs that may be academic in nature and that are non-African American (Morgan, 2012; Solórzano & Ceja, 2000; Turner, 2001).
African American Women’s Academic Engagement Practices


Classroom Experiences

Research indicates that African American women on college campuses experience academic and social engagement differently than their same race male peers and their white female students who attend PWIs. Evidence suggests that African American college students often have familial responsibilities, such as children and jobs that impede their ability to maintain achievement levels that are needed to remain in school (Brown-Collins, 2007; Kraft, 1991; Morgan, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Robinson & Tucker, 1998). As stated earlier, experiences of hostility are encountered by Black students, both male and female. However, Black women encounter racism and sexism more than African American men at the collegiate level.

The hostile and chilly atmosphere in classrooms perpetuated by fellow classmates and faculty can impede academic engagement and achievement by African American undergraduate women. Solórzano and Ceja (2000) conducted a qualitative study of African American men and women who participated in one of 10 focus groups to study how students respond to racial words or actions that are not always blatant, and to determine what if any impact these aggressions have on the campus racial climate. The
authors reported that African American women commented that they felt as though they were viewed as a numerical racial minority and that they were often ignored in class. Some of the women emphasized that they were often the only African American woman in the class, and that having more African American women would have made the atmosphere more comfortable. One female commented that “every time I leave my room, I’m conscious of being Black and people are looking at me and saying, she’s here on affirmative action” (Solórzano and Ceja, 2000, p. 67). The feeling of being in the spotlight seems to cause a sense of paranoia for students and gives them a perception of always being watched by other students and members of the campus at large.

In a study on the classroom and social experiences of Black women at a predominantly white campus and their perceived uncomfortableness in the environment, Turner (2001) found that Black women face coldness and tension in the classroom and in the campus environment. For example, African American women are not able or invited to join non-African American clubs or join academic groups on campus. This segregates them from white peers and sometimes other black women. Some reasons for these tensions stem from competition with one another and often the competition may be for the attention of men. As noted earlier, the findings also reveal that Black women have challenges having their voices heard in the classroom. Some women reported that in order to prove their right to be in the academy, they have taken initiative and become active in the life of the campus (Turner, 2001).

A 2007 report by the National Association for Women in Education (NAME) following up on the association’s 1982 study examined a number of quantitative and qualitative studies concerning race and gender and the effects these two categories had on women’s classroom experiences. The results indicated that African American women were shown the least concern in the class, and were asked fewer questions by their
professors (NAME, 2007). The typical classroom scenario reported by participants described a pattern in which professors posed questions and then called upon White males first, then White women, African American men and African American women in that order (Morgan, 2012).

Although, most studies have focused on Black Greek Letter organizations as support mechanisms for social integration for African American students on the nation’s HBCUs and PWIs (Harper, 2008), Patton, Flowers and Bridges (2011) studied the influence of Greek affiliation on African American students engagement by racial composition of the campus. Additionally, a recent study by Harper focuses on the influence of these organizations on classroom participation. Harper’s (2008) qualitative study explored the effects of membership in Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) as it pertains to class participation and African American student engagement in predominantly white classroom environments at a PWI in the Midwest. Specifically, data were collected in two phases. Phase One of the study involved 10 juniors and seniors (six women and four men) that had been affiliated with their organization for more than one year. Individual interviews were held with the ten students. Phase Two involved 121 students, (62.8% sorority women) and (37.2% fraternity men). Eighty-six students were enrolled in classes where they were the only African American. One hundred thirteen were taking at least one class where they were the only African American. These students were recruited through visitation at the chapter meetings, and the researcher asked for volunteers to participate in the study. Eleven focus groups were held because of the large number of students willing to participate.

The findings indicated African American women members of BGLOs felt their membership in these organizations led to productive engagement inside the classroom. For example, students realizing that they were the only African American student in the
class prompted them to speak up as a means of choosing to represent their race. This finding was in direct contrast to Morgan (2012) finding that students that were African American and the only student in the class, found themselves reluctant to speak up. This reluctance was attributed to being the only student in the class. How being the only Black student in the class and the effect upon that student’s choice to communicate or not is exhibited by one student in this study. One student commented

> Whites already think the worst of us. I am not going to give the professors and white men more ammunition by coming to class unprepared and unwilling to intelligently contribute to class discussions, making African Americans look bad. That would be counterproductive. (p. 105)

Sorority members realized that their grades would impact the whole chapter because one member’s GPA can affect the whole chapter’s GPA. Also, African American women perceived that their faculty expected less of them and felt they were intellectually inferior to other White members of the class. These results differ from Bridges, Flowers, and Patton’s (2011) study of a national sample of African American students to determine if Greek affiliation facilitated more student engagement. Their findings were that African American men and women affiliated with a Greek organization were relatively more engaged at HBCUs than at PWIs. Greek affiliation was determined to enhance engagement with faculty interaction and interaction with peers (Bridges, Flowers, & Patton, 2011).

**Students’ Interactions with Faculty Members**

Faculty interaction appears to be among the most salient of students’ college experiences, particularly when the interaction is academic in nature (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Empirical evidence shows the differences in faculty-interaction, collaborative learning, and engagement for women at single-sex institutions
as opposed to co-ed institutions (Kinzie et al., 2007). Although faculty interaction is important for black student success at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), they have difficulty connecting with white faculty (Fleming, 1984; Sax, Bryant & Harper, 2005; Sedlacek, 1987). Sedlacek (1987), summarizing experiences of Black students at PWIs over a 20-year period, concluded that Black students might have difficulty ascertaining at what academic level they are achieving.

The lack of ability for students to have a sense of the level at which they are performing in class is because Black students perceive that their professors do not give them an adequate assessment about how they are doing academically (Sedlacek, 1987; Walpole, 1999). Because faculty members play an important role in social and academic integration of students (Tinto, 1993), and because those relationships seem to be mediated by race, both the frequency and the quality of student relationships with faculty members are important in understanding the factors that affect success for students of color. Sax, Bryant, and Harper (2005) found that women performed better academically in college when they had meaningful connections to their faculty. Survey participants reported that they got better grades when they felt validated and supported by faculty. This connectedness helped them to grow intellectually and personally (Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005).

Kim and Sax (2007) examined the effects of differences in student-faculty interaction in and out of the classroom by gender, race, social class, and first generation status for 58,281 students who participated in the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey. Findings indicated that out of class research-related faculty interaction predicted higher grade point averages for all groups and course-related faculty interactions led to higher grade point averages and degree aspirations for all students but African Americans and Latinos.
Tinto (1993) suggested the absence of a faculty student relationship has a great impact on students in higher education. Likewise, Astin (1993) argued that faculty has a significant impact on students’ overall college development. He reported that “student-faculty interaction has significant positive correlations with every academic attainment outcome: college GPA, degree attainment, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate or professional school” (p. 6). Although African American women who attend PWIs perceive a lack of support and an unwelcoming academic environment, they have not been deterred from the belief in the value of education (Atwater, 2009; Constantine & Greer, 2003). They may perceive faculty as inaccessible, feel overlooked in the classroom, have difficulty initiating communication with faculty members, and may feel greater comfort with faculty more similar to themselves in race, gender, and field of study or department (Constantine & Greer, 2003, Lundberg, 2010).

Researchers theorize that African American students are more preoccupied and conscious of perceived racial discrimination than white students on campus (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999). Other scholars posit that strong relationships with faculty are important to college student success which includes academic achievement, satisfaction with college in general, and retention (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sax, Bryant, & Harper, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Additionally, connections with black faculty in higher education can increase the feelings of self-efficacy among black students (Fries-Britt, 2002; Guifrida & Douthit 2010; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Sedlacek, 1987).

Students of color are reluctant to share their thoughts with faculty of racial/ethnic groups other than their own fear of being misunderstood or not taken seriously (Guifrida & Douthit 2010). Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) conducted a quantitative study with multiple racial groups using the Cultural Attitudes and Climate Questionnaire. The
questionnaire was mailed to 964 first and third-year students, achieving 60% return rate. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure sufficient racial and ethnic representation. There were 136 African American students (43/93 men and women respectively). Students self-reported on the survey their perceptions and experiences of the university racial and cultural climate. Results indicated that African American students perceived more negative relationships with faculty than Latino/as or Asian Pacific Islander students. They also were less satisfied with the university compared to other students in the sample, citing interracial tension in the residence halls. All three groups consisting of African American, Asian Pacific Islander, and Latino/as students perceived interactions with faculty more negatively than White students.

Ten years later, Lundberg (2010) conducted a quantitative study concerning students’ academic experiences with faculty interaction. The purpose was to see the benefits in learning through students’ engagement and through academic experiences with faculty. Lundberg surveyed 643 students from several distinct racial/ethnic groups—African American, Asian Pacific Islander, Mexican American, and Native American. All participants had taken the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) in years 1999-2001. Only the responses for students of color were compiled from the CSEQ database. Results revealed that males of color gained most cognitively in general education, science and technology, and intellectual skills. However, perceiving faculty to be approachable, helpful, encouraging, and understanding is more important than the frequency with which students of color engage with faculty (Lundberg, 2010).

Lundberg (2010) noted that student satisfaction with faculty relationships appears to vary by race, with White students reporting the greatest satisfaction and African American and Native American students reporting the least satisfaction (Lundberg, 2010). Therefore, institutions need to further explore how they can engage students of
color in academically purposeful activities of the university (Lundberg, 2010). Just as Guiffrida and Douthit (2010) and Fries-Britt (2002) intimated that African American student’s report that their academic ability is not taken seriously, even those individuals who are high-achieving. Other researchers suggest that both direct interaction with faculty and perceptions of faculty availability and interests in their students are positively associated with students’ success in college (Lundberg, 2010; Munoz & Rendon, 2011).

**Summary**

The literature is replete with studies with incidents of dissatisfaction felt by African American women in the collegiate environment. Some authors suggest that institutions should find ways to fully engage African American women in the academic life of the campus. Many of these women are high-achieving, yet they believe that their abilities are not taken seriously (Fries-Britt, 2002). The previous section discussed how AAUW engaged in collegiate spaces inside and outside the classroom with peers and faculty. Research studies detailed how AAUW have experienced hostility and isolation in their engagement practices. The next section provides accounts of the social engagement experiences of AAUW on college campuses.

**Social Engagement Experiences**

Although researchers suggest that getting involved on campus is an important aspect of college (Astin, 1984), the literature suggests that African American women report experiencing an institutional climate that they describe as unfriendly towards them. The sense of perceived unwelcoming environment discourages their engagement. Therefore, disengagement gives them a sense of feeling isolated and alienated from the general campus student body (Brown-Collins, 2007; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Davis et al., 2004; Howard-Hamilton, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Moses, 1989).
Existing literature highlights the significance of student involvement in particular types of activities as a means for encouraging student achievement (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Kuh, 2009). Such activities include peer and faculty interactions, involvement in groups and activities comprised of individuals from diverse backgrounds, use of academic and social support services, and activities the student perceives to be culturally relevant (Astin, 1996). Research indicates that the lack of social integration of African American women into the mainstream of campus life is often felt at PWIs (Von Robertson et al., 2005). But, the same experiences have been known to emerge on HBCUs as well (Caldwell, 2000).

African American women may participate in different activities as a way of coping with feelings of isolation, alienation, and their need to form bonds with other African American women while also staying connected to the black community (Burgess & Brown, 2000; Caldwell, 2000; Zamani, 2003). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note that the coping strategies employed by African American women are affected positively by their interaction with faculty, and that this interaction may be different from that of Black males and women of other cultures (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). African American women have found institutional organizations and community organizations to help bridge the social void they encounter as college students. Research indicates some institutional organizations may be in the form of sororities, church organizations, Sister Circles, and Sister Friends (Bryant-Davis, 2013; Mitchell, 2000; Patton & McClure, 2003; Watt, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

**Social Organizations**

A number of prominent social and civic organizations established by African American women are excellent examples of women supporting one another. Evidence of these groups is apparent in the literature as far back as 1908, when the first black female
Greek-letter organization, “Alpha Kappa Alpha, was established at Howard University in Washington, DC” (Caldwell, 2000, p. 105).

Institutional qualities within Greek-letter organizations provide for support of African American women both individually and collectively (Caldwell, 2000). The establishment of organizations such as Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho came early in the 20th century. They began out of necessity for African American women on college campuses for bonding of academically talented women due to segregation and sexism on campuses. Even within a predominantly African American setting, there was a need for women to come together to support themselves (Caldwell, 2000). These organizations represented mechanisms for African American women to develop a sense of connection with other African American women and a means to be encouraged and mentored for leadership. Although the organizations were initially formed for individual benefit, within a 20 year period, goals extended to an increased focus on social issues and an incorporation of the professional aspirations of African American women, with the social needs of the black community (Caldwell, 2000). The collective experiences of sorority women and their commitment through service and activism to the community made these groups important institutional resources for African American women (Caldwell, 2000).

Kimbrough’s (1998) quantitative study investigated the impact of membership on involvement in campus-related activities and leadership development using non-members as a control group. Students at 12 institutions were sampled using the Student Involvement and Leadership Scale, Competing Values Managerial Skills Instrument, and Leadership Assessment Scale and analyzed using MANOVA. Black Greeks were found to be more engaged in campus activities and organizations than non-members and held more leadership positions on campuses. Data suggested that Black Greek membership
increased overall involvement, which has been found to influence persistence and achievement (Kimbrough, 1998).

On a similar note, Pike’s (2003) quantitative study examined extracurricular engagement in Greek fraternity and sorority membership and its impact on student engagement and educational outcomes. Using 15 institutions and over 6,700 students who responded to the 2000 NSSE, Pike found a weak positive relationship between Greek membership and student engagement. Although membership in Greek affiliated organizations have shown strong correlations in other studies (Kimbrough, 1998), this study found a weak influence between engagement and gains in learning. Additionally, the effect was found to be stronger for seniors than for the freshman participants (Pike, 2003). The findings substantiate the idea that the more engaged a student is at the institution, the greater achievements the student will have. The same findings were discovered in relation to members in Black Greek Letter organizations.

Other researchers explored the advantages and disadvantages of membership in Greek letter organizations on college students. Guiffrida (2004) conducted a qualitative study using 84 high and low-achieving African American students (55% females and 45% males) in their freshmen through senior years at a PWI in the northeastern part of the country. Students with low GPAs participated in a university-wide retention program, and as a part of their membership in the retention program, agreed to participate in the study. He investigated to what degree and under what conditions student involvement in African American organizations hindered their academic achievement. Guiffrida (2004) revealed that students with low and high GPAs differed in their response to being involved in African American specific organizations. Students with low GPAs reported that being overly involved in organizations was the cause of their low academic performance. Conversely, high achieving students report that they were actively involved in African
American organizations, but not overly involved to the degree that they neglected their academics (Guiffrida, 2004).

Being a member of student organizations has the potential to foster a sense of community among African American students on campus. However, the degree of involvement has a direct effect on students’ academic achievement if their focus on academics is secondary to their social involvement in organizations. Membership in social organizations was one support mechanism that African American college women used to connect with other Black women. Additionally, the literature states that other forms of social supports such as organized religion (e.g. church, spirituality) and therapeutic counseling groups were used by these women (Bryant-Davis, 2013; Mitchell, 2000; Patton & McClure, 2003; Watt, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

Black Greek Letter Organizations are just some of the clubs/organizations in which black undergraduate women may engage themselves. African American women may be engaged in activities outside of college that help to foster support for them (Burges & Brown, 2000; Caldwell, 2000; Patton & Harper, 2003). Bryant-Davis (2013), Mitchell, (2000), and Winkle-Wagner (2009) speak about the affirmative influence of cultural-specific groups (e.g. Sister Circles and Sister Friends) and the therapeutic role that bonds established through these assemblies have on the lives of African American women.

Winkle-Wagner (2009) conducted an ethnographical qualitative study concerning African American undergraduate women and how balancing relationships in college and at home influenced these women’s college experiences and, ultimately their educational pathways. She observed the Sister Circles in which African American women participated on campus for nine months bi-weekly. The purpose of the study was to investigate the maneuvering of relationships and the tension that these women felt between home and
the college. Her findings were that “the homelessness that the women described—not fitting on campus or in their home communities and families—related in many ways to their own experience of being different on campus, based on their race, gender, or socioeconomic background” (2009, p. 23). Some of these women felt that there was no longer a space into which they fit. They neither fit in the college environment nor previous home environment. Scholars have noted that African American women feel obligated, connected, and responsible for their home communities (Brown-Collins, 2007; Caldwell, 2000).

African American undergraduate women are more likely than other groups to stay connected to and give service back to their communities (Brown-Collins, 2007; Caldwell, 2000). Because many PWI colleges and universities are not situated in communities where significant numbers of Blacks reside, these women have to leave their communities to go to college. Therefore, there is physical distance between African American undergraduate college women and their home communities. This distance may cause a disconnection between family and community. Furthermore, AAUW may wish to contribute and participate in the uplifting of home communities, but are unable to do so because of distance between college location and home.

African American females at a PWI experience a number of challenges in the classroom and around the campus environment at large. These challenges of isolation, perceived hostility, and debunking stereotypes hinder their academic and social engagement and consequently their academic success. Despite challenges they face, numerous African American undergraduate women are able to achieve academic success in college. There is much to be learned about the experiences of African American undergraduate women at predominantly White universities. Rather than focus only on the negatives that hinder students’ success, this research intends to examine the
experiences and engagement practices of these women to determine the extent academic and social engagement influences their academic achievement as perceived by them. The previous section reviewed literature regarding social engagement activities of AAUW on college campuses. Additionally, information reported about student engagement included participation in both social and service organizations. AAUW participation in these organizations [Black Greek Letter Organizations] was thought to contribute to a feeling of belonging where AAUW were able to gain support from other members of the college community to bolster their academic and social engagement.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed relevant literature about African American undergraduate women and their engagement on predominantly White, Historically Black colleges and universities. Moreover, how AAUW engaged on women’s colleges was highlighted. Additionally, challenges they face and how they have maneuvered the inside and outside parameters of their academic and social engagement and how engagement has influenced their academic achievement was discussed. Chapter Three explains the theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) and Engagement theory (Kuh et al., 2005) that guide understanding of Black women’s college engagement and their academic success.
In this chapter, I provide details of the theoretical frameworks, Engagement theory (Kuh et al., 2005) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) I use in this study to explore the engagement practices of African American Undergraduate women (AAUW) that they perceive to influence their academic achievement. Being an African American and a woman continues to expose these undergraduate women to common educational and societal experiences of oppression, denigration, and marginalization. In the U.S. society, it is important to note that African American women live and share a world view that differs from those who are not Black and female (Collins, 2000, 2009; Harley, 1990; Hooks, 1981; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). The role that race and gender play in the engagement of African American Undergraduate women has not been extensively studied. Scholars have argued that engagement in educationally purposeful activities is beneficial for all students (Kuh, et al., 2005). However, the engagement of AAUW in academic and social activities has not been explored in order to determine if their engagement in educationally purposeful activities yields the same results as it does for males and women of other ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, I will use Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) to describe how engagement practices might differ for these women and how it influences their academic achievement.

Moreover, there are a number of theories that have been used to study African American women. Most often cited have been: Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Feminism, and Black Feminist Thought (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Of these theories examined, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) is most aligned with the purpose and research questions that are foundation of this study. Black Feminist Thought (Collins,
2000, 2009) will be utilized as a secondary theory to guide this study because of the socio historical inequality of education for these women of color.

Black Feminist Thought is useful when conducting research on AAUW because BFT counter balances the portrayal of AAUW by non-Black members of society. In order to gain insight into the lived experiences of AAUW, their standpoint must be highlighted in order to accurately portray their individual and collective understandings.

**Engagement Theory**

Engagement theory (Kuh et al., 2005) will be used to examine African American women’s perceptions of how their academic and social engagement practices contribute to their academic achievement at an elite four-year public university. The concept of engagement has grown from previous studies of student involvement (Astin, 1984; Pace, 1985) and integration (Tinto, 1993). Student involvement, originally defined by Astin (1984), is “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). This theory is comprised of five postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in objects...
2. Involvement occurs upon a continuum.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features.
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in the program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (p. 518)
Astin’s (1984) theory of student development looks at the ways in which student behavior can be quantified or qualified. The theory does not seek to understand a student’s motivation for becoming involved or their emotions as a result of involvement (Astin, 1984). According to Astin (1984), a highly involved student would be characterized as someone who devotes “considerable energy to studying, spends time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students” (p. 518). For many, historically underrepresented students, such as African American women, they need more than just to be involved into the campus to succeed.

Pace (1980, 85) began to question the input-environment-output model espoused by Astin. Consequently, Pace was led to ponder the existence of student characteristics coupled with environment as a means to evaluating student outcomes. He therefore authored the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) in 1989 that also involved obtaining a snapshot of student effort. He felt that the degree, to which students could be held accountable for their own success or lack thereof, was needed for students to acquire positive outcomes from college attendance.

In 1993, Tinto introduced the student integration model. Notably, this model has changed since its inception over a 35-year period. The most recent version of the model includes not only motivational variables like goal commitment, but also academic self-concept and self-efficacy beliefs. The inclusion of different student groups, such as African Americans, adult students, transfers, and low-income students, allows for the model to be more applicable when trying to understand the unique experiences of a diverse population experiencing college persistence, retention, and transition.

Kuh et al., (2005) extends the previous theories and evolved a new theory of engagement. The authors define engagement as the effort and resources institutions
provide to ensure that students are actively engaged in their educational experiences. Kuh et al.’s (2005) research is largely based on findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), through which they seek to learn about effective educational practices. Through their survey work and research, they have determined five benchmarks of educational practices that impact student engagement:

1. **Level of Academic Challenge**: the amount of intellectual challenge the institution provides to students. This involves the amount of engagement in academic activities (e.g. preparing for class, reading and writing, an institutional environment that emphasizes studying and academic performance)

2. **Active Collaborative Learning**: the applicability of student learning to various settings and collaboration with others in solving problems (e.g. asking questions in class, making presentations in class, working with classmates outside of class, tutoring or teaching others, etc.)

3. **Student Interactions with Faculty Members**: the levels and types of interactions that students have with faculty members (e.g. discussing grades, talking about career aspirations, working with faculty on research, etc.)

4. **Enriching Educational Experiences**: seeks to know the enriching experiences students have had (e.g. interacting with students of different religions or political backgrounds, talking with students of different races, being in an institutional climate that encourages students from various backgrounds, etc.)
5. **Supportive Campus Environments**: looks to discover the ways in which the campus provides students with an environment that helps them succeed (e.g. help students to succeed in academics, cope with out-of-classroom responsibilities, thrive socially, and promotes healthy relationships between various stakeholders, etc.) (Kuh, et al., 2005, p. 9).

These five benchmarks outlined in Engagement Theory (Kuh, et al., 2005) take into account the necessary components of a student’s engagement; if applied, they constitute success in academics and social settings within a postsecondary context. The level of academic challenge, active collaborative learning, student interactions with faculty members, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment will be investigated to determine if some or all of these constructs come together to help African American women succeed in college, particularly at a predominantly White institution.

**Black Feminist Thought**

Historically, African American women (AAW) have experienced inequitable and unequal access to postsecondary education. Because of the inequalities that AAW continue to encounter in various contexts, I see Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) as a necessary theory when researching this population within the higher education context. Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2000, 2009) emerged as a result of research investigating the patterns of African American women being excluded from the feminist movement (Collins, 2000, 2009; Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Collins, 2000, 2009) a theoretical framework for understanding the intersection of class, gender, and race as social constructs that impact the lives of African American women was developed by Collins. Collins’ (2000, 2009)
work in an effort to highlight a distinct standpoint of African American women that
describes their lived experiences with racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism
(Collins, 1989; Perry, 1970). The theory was an attempt respond to the perceived neglect
of traditional feminist theory. Traditional feminist theory was not inclusive of the lives of
black women and the racism experienced in society (Collins, 2000, 2009), but centered
on the needs of middle-class White females (Collins, 2000, 2009; Howard-Hamilton,
2003). The themes of this theory are: (1) The experiences of Black women are told by
Black women with their own voice, (2) Black women have commonality of experiences
and individual experiences because of the historical context of inequality in which we
have lived, and (3) Black women are a diverse group consisting of class, age, religion,
and sexual orientation differences. Despite the individual differences that Black women
possess, there are strategies that they use necessary to survival as a marginalized and
denigrated group (Collins, 2000, 2009).

In response to limited extant literature of AAUW in the research concerning
academic achievement in postsecondary education, and the challenges and exclusion
that they have experienced because of race and gender in society, college campuses
and classrooms, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) will guide my focus on
African American women and their experiences while matriculating at an elite PWI.

One of the most widely held notions about the survival of African American
women in higher education is the importance of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000,
2009) as a theory, which provides insight into how they perceive their world. The BFT
(Collins, 2000, 2009) framework is helpful when analyzing data from interviews to
interpret experiences that African American women encounter in the academy. BFT
(Collins, 2000, 2009) provides a helpful framework for developing strategies to
promulgate self-worth and efficacy, by AAUW, and it provides a source of inspiration for
engagement of AAUW in overcoming the barriers that they encounter in various contexts. BFT (Collins, 2000, 2009) serves as an external and internal construct that helps AAUW to understand the world around them, and the development of strategies to manage and encourage achievement. While BFT (Collins, 2000, 2009) is an important component of self-actualization by AAUW, there is another dimension of their continuing personal development that occurs as they transcend the long-held stereotypes. BFT (Collins, 2000, 2009) helps AAUW begin to operate in a manner that increasingly helps them move beyond notions deficits in their experiences that compromise their being able to excel in academic work. Constructs of Black Feminist Thought helps to provide a critical lens by which AAUW’s perception about their academic achievement can be analyzed...

Engagement theory (Kuh et al., 2005) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) are theories that are appropriate for this study. Engagement theory (Kuh et al., 2005) states that engagement in educationally purposeful activities results in positive outcomes for all students. Meanwhile, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) state that African American women have a worldview from which we speak that differs from the stories that are told about us by others. These theories not only present a useful lens by which to explore the perceptions of African American undergraduate women, but also provide the research insight into the degree to which their practices of engagement help to foster student learning and academic achievement.

As reviewed in Chapter Two, there is a limited amount of literature exploring the specific academic and social engagement practices of African American undergraduate women. Therefore, the purpose of my study is to investigate the perceptions of sophomores, juniors, and seniors AAUW at an elite PWI in Northern California. My study sought to understand their lived experiences as college students. By documenting their perceptions and experiences of how engagement has influenced their academic
achievement, a contribution will be made to research concerning the academic achievement and engagement of African American Undergraduate women.

Summary

This chapter outlined the theoretical frameworks used for this study. I summarized the importance of Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) to this phenomenological inquiry. Because Black Feminist perspectives have been historically excluded in academic discourse, BFT provided an important lens through which I analyzed data collected from participants. Engagement Theory afforded a useful means through which AAUW practices could be categorized and analyzed to determine their relationships to the perceptions reported by student participants.

Chapter four will detail the research design used for this study. A description of the recruitment strategies, sample selection, institution site, trustworthiness, and role of the researcher used in this study will be described.
Chapter 4

Methodology

A qualitative research approach is needed to gain an in-depth understanding of African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of and experiences with academic and social engagement practices at a four-year highly elite, predominantly White, public university in Northern California. Qualitative researchers subscribe to the belief that there are multiple realities represented in participants’ perspectives. In addition, this research approach does not seek to quantify the meaning of findings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003), but instead, qualitative studies seek to ascertain the meanings and representations of experiences of the participants as viewed by them (Polkinghorne, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Through the use of multiple methods (e.g. interviews, demographic questionnaires, documents, and artifacts) for gathering data, qualitative research enabled me to capture the unique ways these women make meaning of their lived experiences as college students (Creswell, 2013).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

1) What are African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of their academic and social engagement practices at University of California, Joplin (UC Joplin)?

2) How do these practices shape their experiences and academic success on campus?

3) How can these women’s experiences inform the academic achievement discourse regarding ways to improve the educational outcomes of historically underrepresented students?
Methodology

Phenomenology is a methodological tradition in German philosophy. Edmond Husserl is credited as being the father of phenomenology (Finlay, 2014; Lichtman, 2014). A former, mathematician, Husserl was persuaded by Brentano, an Australian philosopher, to abandon mathematics and engage in a new form of philosophy. Phenomenology had a strong history in Europe during the 1930s. The unfortunate death of Husserl early in his study of this new approach did not squelch the spread of this new type of inquiry that differed from pure scientific inquiry (Lichtman, 2014). Because of Husserl’s writings, this new form of inquiry took hold even after his death. Heidegger and Ponte were proponents of phenomenology and continued to drive this approach. Phenomenology had its beginnings in Europe, but has spread to parts of Asia, Canada, and the United States. Phenomenology as a methodological approach was first most often used in disciplines such as education, nursing, and art education. The era of the 1990’s would show a dramatic increase in phenomenology as an approach in the field of education (Lichtman, 2014).

Phenomenology as a research methodology has a focus on the essence of lived experience of participants in a study. Finlay (2014) defines phenomenology as “the study of phenomena: their nature and meanings. The focus is on the way things appear to us through experience or in our consciousness” (p. 1). Sokolowski (2000) defines phenomenology as the study of human experience. He adds that the way things seem to individuals and the way things present themselves through our experiences is what defines phenomenology in the philosophical sense. Similarly, Rossman and Rallis (1998) maintain that phenomenological research focuses on lived experiences and seeks to focus on in-depth meanings of a particular experience. They comment that through
language, a primary vehicle for dialogue and reflection, the meaning of the experience will be revealed.

Van Manen (1990) states that “the purpose of phenomenological inquiry are description, interpretation, and critical self-reflection into the world as world for those that have experienced the phenomenon under study” (p. 72). Since phenomenology permits participants to describe their lived experiences in the natural setting (Berg, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990), the use of the phenomenological methodology allows me to examine perceptions of Black women’s engagement practices through their voices as they matriculate through everyday college environment. In order to understand the “essence” of their experience as perceived by the participants, (Creswell, 2013; Giorgio, 1985; Patton, 1990; Rossman & Rallis, 1998), all maintain that a phenomenological inquiry is appropriate when a researcher wishes to investigate the meanings and perspectives of participants. Lichtman (2014) further posits that phenomenology is an appropriate methodology to use when the focus of a research study involves areas that have not been important to previous research (i.e. African American Undergraduate Women). This study qualifies as a phenomenological study because I explore the perceptions and meanings of AAUW engagement in-depth, and how their everyday college world appears to them from their point of view. Because this area of inquiry has not been fully investigated, the exploration of the phenomenon of African American women’s perceptions and engagement will help to inform practice, policy, and theory relating to the academic achievement and engagement of these women. Throughout this dissertation pseudonyms were used to refer to proper names and names of institutions.
Site Information

In the following site information and throughout this study, all references to the university and names used in this study are pseudonyms. University of California at Joplin (UCJ) was selected as the site for this study because of the state of California’s reputation for having excellent higher education institutions. Despite the decline of enrollment of historically underrepresented students (i.e. African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans) after the passage of Proposition 209 in 1996, \(^5\) which made race-based admissions unconstitutional, and contributed to the decline of African American access and enrollment to the more elite universities in the state, The University of California system, of which UCJ is a part, continues to explore ways to increase the access, persistence, and graduation rates of this population (University of California Office of the President, 2013).

The admission requirements for students admitted into this highly selective system most often involve superior academic performance in high school as evidenced by their G.P.A., Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT), and American College Testing (ACT) scores. Unfortunately, similar to national trends, there are more African American students (as well as other historically underrepresented students) enrolled in less selective two-year and four-year institutions. For instance, 40% of high school graduates enroll in any public California college or university, 7.2% enroll in the University of California system, 10.5% in the California State University system and 22.9% in the California Community Colleges (CA.GOV, 2011). In an article written by Allen-Taylor (2013), some African American students have declined admission to this elite university, often choosing to go to HBCUs instead, because they feel unwelcome. Notwithstanding, \(^5\) Proposition 209 was a California constitutional amendment that stated that preferential treatment could not be given to any individual based on race, sex, or ethnicity in public education. While graduation rates of African Americans graduates from public higher education institutions increased by 6.5%, (1998) enrollment decreased significantly in 1998 (Allswang, J. M., 2000).
African American women are being recruited by other top-quality universities, and these institutions are welcoming them (Allen-Taylor, 2013). For this reason, I wanted to investigate African American undergraduate women’s reasons for coming to the university, and to explore how they have been able to achieve academically as a result of their engagement in a perceived hostile environment.

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from the University of Texas at Arlington in September, 2014, I sent recruitment letters to faculty, staff and directors, and asked if they would make available the student recruitment letters to eligible students. I had previously contacted the research department at University of California, Joplin to make sure I followed all necessary protocol needed to recruit students from the campus for a research study. The research study followed the rules and regulations outlined by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Arlington (See Appendix D). Prior to interviews, the participants were emailed the recruitment letter explaining the purpose of the study and the expectations if they decided to participate (See Appendix B). The director of the African American Theme floor and the Student services staff were instrumental in making the recruitment letters available to students. Additionally, students were helpful in securing their roommates and friends who were eligible, to participate in the study.

Institutional Background

The University of California at Joplin is located in Joplin, California. The city of Joplin, is a midsized urban city in northern California. It is surrounded by several bodies of water and has numerous parks in the area. The city also has a diverse population of 112,580 residents. The ethnic and educational breakdown is: 59.17% Caucasian, 13.51% African American, 16.22% Asian, 9.8% Hispanic, 5.75% mixed, and 4.76% other race. Joplin has a highly educated community with 68 percent of the residents holding
associates or bachelor’s degrees and 26 percent enrolled in higher education. There are three four-year universities in Joplin. These universities are: UC Joplin, Joplin Theological Seminary, and Joplin University of the Arts. As is customary for most elite schools, residents and college students boast that UCJ is one of the best public educational institutions in the country.

The University of California at Joplin (UCJ) was one of the first universities established in the University of California System. The college is a large-sized four-year public Carnegie Research University (i.e. high research activity) located in the heart of Joplin, California. The cost of attendance is $32,158.00 per year for attendance. UCJ is a diverse campus with the demographics comprised of White (32%), Asian American (44%), and underrepresented students (19%), with Latinos at 14%, African Americans at 4%, and Native Americans at 1%. With an enrollment of 48% men and 52% women, UCJ has a competitive undergraduate (as well as graduate) admissions process with an acceptance rate of 17.4% of prospective applicants. For example, the current freshmen class of 2013 had an unweighted high school GPA of 3.90, SAT scores between 1960 and 2270, and ACT scores between 29 and 34. The university has a student population of 25,755 undergraduates and 10,125 graduate/professional students.

The six year graduation rates for the undergraduate student population, based on the 2005 cohort are: 56.3%/60.8% for White male/female, 63.3%/71.7% for Asian American males/females, 53.7%/47.5% for Hispanic females/male and 43.2%/35.2% for African American females/males (Student Profile, UCJ Office of Undergraduate Admissions, 2014). See Table 4.1 below.
Table 4.1 Six-Year Graduation Rates for Undergraduate Student Population Based on 2005 Cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student population</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>52.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other University of California and California State Universities had lower graduation rates for African American undergraduate women (Please see Table 4.2).
Table 4.2 Six-year Graduation Rates for California Graduates in the California State Universities (CSU) and University of California (UC) Systems

The relatively higher graduation rate for African American undergraduate women made the selection of UCJ the best choice for this study.

UCJ reports indicate that 45.2 percent of African American females graduate at the undergraduate level within a four-year period, and 80.8 percent in a five-year period (The State of Higher Education in California, 2013; U. S. Department of Education Institute of Educational Sciences, NCES, 2013).
Selection of Participants

Creswell (2013) posits that three- to-ten participants can be used for a phenomenological study, because the goal of doing in-depth interviewing is to present an in-depth picture of the lived experiences of the participants. Therefore, purposeful sampling was used to recruit ten African American undergraduate women attending University of California at Joplin. Purposeful sampling is defined as selecting the best informants that can describe the lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 1990). To be able to participate in the study, the following criteria had to be met by participants: 1) an individual must self-identify as an African-American woman, 2) be 18 years of age or older, 3) be enrolled full-time as an undergraduate student, 4) be in sophomore, junior, or senior standing, 5) and have a cumulative Grade Point Average (G.P.A.) of 3.0 or higher. In addition, students must have been enrolled at UCJ as a first-time freshmen; they could not have transferred from a community college or another four-year university.

These criteria were chosen for this study because I determined that students who had matriculated at the university beyond their freshmen year had better perceptions about the factors that shaped their achievement over time on the particular campus where the study was undertaken. Students who possessed a GPA of 3.0 or higher demonstrated academic success. These participants were appropriate to speak to the phenomena being investigated. They were able to speak at length about engagement activities in which they had participated or those activities that caused them to disengage.

Freshmen students were not eligible to participate in this study because they may not have university G.P.A.s and extensive experience as a college student at UC J. African American women who are 18 years of age and older were selected for this study because they can legally volunteer to consent to participate in a research study without
their parents’/guardians’ permission. Transfer students were not eligible because they may have many extraneous experiences that contributed to their success that may not be attributable to engagement at UCI.

Fifteen participants were recruited from student-initiated organizations (e.g. Black Student Organization, Black sororities and fraternities, etc.), designated floors of residence halls (e.g. African American-themed residential floors), academic departments (e.g. Department of Black Studies), and academic support programs and centers (e.g. African American student development office, LEAD Student leadership Center, etc.). I recruited students from these organizations, departments, programs, halls, and centers because of the potential for more African American women to be involved in these spaces. The administrators, leaders, faculty, and staff in these settings were contacted and asked to email a recruitment letter to their students.

The first 10 African American women who responded to the recruitment letters received emails, and those who met all the necessary criteria, were contacted; stating they had been selected to participate in the study. These women were provided with a consent form with additional information about the study. Participant scheduled interviews at times and locations that were convenient for them. The interviews were all held on the university campus in a conference room. Initially, a limited number of students responded to my first recruitment efforts. Because all of the women who responded were sophomores, I used snowball sampling (Patton, 1990). Snowball sampling involves asking key informants to suggest others who might be interested in participating in the study in order to solicit participation from a diverse group.
Demographic Summary

The nine African American undergraduate women who participated in this study represent a heterogeneous group with varying experiences, interests and majors. (Note: I initially recruited ten AAUW for this study, but one of the participants dropped out of the study to pursue a study abroad opportunity in South America). The AAUW came from two parent and single heads of households, and were at various matriculation levels in college. They [AAUW] represent various engagement activities and work statuses while attending UCJ. (See Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 Demographic Characteristics, Engagement and Work Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Demographics Status</th>
<th>College Level</th>
<th>Engagement Status</th>
<th>Work Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucille</td>
<td>Parents are Nigerian/two parent household</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Resident Assistant (RA)</td>
<td>two jobs on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>One parent</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>NCNW</td>
<td>on campus job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Two parent household</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>NCNW</td>
<td>on campus job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>Single parent household</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td></td>
<td>did not have a job at the time of the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lara</td>
<td>Two parent household</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Resident Assistant (RA)</td>
<td>on campus job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erykah</td>
<td>Single parent household</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td></td>
<td>on campus job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.3—Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Family Structure</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tratment</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Storm</td>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>NCNW</td>
<td>on and off campus jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey</td>
<td>Two parent</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Residential Programs and Student Services</td>
<td>on campus job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>Single parent</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>HUBBA</td>
<td>on and campus jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Data Collection**

The qualitative methods I used for this study included: demographic questionnaire, (See Appendix H) interviews (See Appendices I and J), photographs (See Appendix H), analytical memos, and unofficial transcripts.

**Demographic Questionnaire**

A demographic questionnaire was used to collect personal data concerning the participants and their families (See Appendix H). Items on the questionnaire addressed past academic performance before entering college and engagement in clubs and activities (See Appendix H). Questions about how participants were financing their education were also included.

**Interviews**

I conducted two face-to-face interviews with nine of the ten original participants; one senior level participant had to drop out of the study and left the country to go to Argentina to participate in a study abroad opportunity. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes at a location most convenient for the participants. I used an interview guide for semi-structured interviews where participants were not constricted to answering
questions in the same manner as a survey would dictate, i.e. circle the best answer (See Appendices I and J). The appropriateness of interview protocol was validated by asking a student the questions on the protocol. This student was not a participant in the actual research study. Consistent with the data gathering tools of phenomenology (Groenewald, 2004), the use of semi-structured interviews afforded participants an opportunity to express their thinking and feeling. Semi-structured interviews also allowed for the use of other probes or questions to explore a response for further information or clarification. Interviewing is recommended as one way of obtaining information about the lived experience of a person in relation to the phenomena being studied (Patton, 1990). The purpose of the first interview was to develop rapport with each participant and gain background and demographic information on their respective families. The first set of interview questions focused on the participants’ personal, familial, and educational experiences. Seidman (2013) recommends that the information gathering in the first interview should set the stage for gathering historical information about the participant.

The second interview entailed specific questions about the participants’ academic and social engagement activities, both in and outside the classroom, and plans after graduation. Seidman (2013) recommends a period of three to five days between interviews. I conducted two interviews as opposed to the three interviews recommended by Siedman (2013), blending present experiences and future plans into one interview because of time constraints for the participants.

Field Notes

According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) field notes are a data collection method used by a researcher to capture and maintain the insights of the experiences of participants over time. These notes were taken during the first and second interview for each participant. They [AAUW] were informed that I would be writing notes as we talked
and that the notes would become a part of the findings of the research project. It was important to me that I maintained a good rapport with the participants. I did this by making sure they knew that I was interested in their lived experiences. One way that I showed interest in their story telling was by maintaining constant eye contact; only shifting my gaze to the audio recorder for brief moments. To avoid shifting eye contact from participants, I wrote mostly with my eyes fixed away from pad of paper I had in my hand. This skill of writing without looking at the paper was practiced before the interviews began and I became quite adept at performing the task. As I became more and more immersed in the interview process, I was able to determine what information was most useful to jot down in my notes. The use of field notes helped me to capture observations made in the surrounding area that I noticed while interviewing. The notes were a tool I used by which I remembered environmental details and served as a camera for my mind’s eye after I had completed the interviews and the days’ events.

**Analytical Memos**

Analytical notes were necessary in order for me to write summaries of what I was seeing as I collected and reviewed the data throughout the process of data collection and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984). I made notes on the actual protocol. I noted facial expressions, voice intonations, physical animations and body language. Analytical notes were summarized after each interview. This process helped when organizing and analyzing the data. The first step was to read the summaries I had written after each interview, looking for common themes that emerged from the data collected from participants.

**Photography**

Using participant selected photographs in qualitative inquiry as a methodological tool for data collection has been discussed by Bogdan & Biklen (1992); Denzin & Lincoln
Their perceptions of engagement and how academic and social practices influence academic achievement set the context for exploration into this phenomenon through use of photo-elicitation. The term photo-elicitation was used by Harper (2002) to mean using pictures to invoke comments about meanings of images during the interview. As the women in the study talked about images in their pictures and what meanings they attached to elements in their engagement lives, the information they shared was deeply rooted in their consciousness. Although, the images were of past engagement activities, the photographs helped participants recall to memory what they perceived to be academic and social engagement. Schulze (2007) posits that the use of photographs during interviews is a non-threatening approach to getting participants to express themselves “through an interpersonal and socially acceptable communication medium” (p. 540). Participants may share sensitive information during photo sharing that they may not otherwise share in another forum. The material in photographs can provide useful data for the researcher. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) maintain that ‘Photographs, which provide descriptive data, because live images are presented, can be more telling than words’. I found the usefulness of reflexive photography in an educational context to coincide with the adage a picture is worth a thousand words.

Transcripts

The document I collected from students included copies of unofficial transcripts. These documents helped to assist me in gathering information based on what the women discussed and/or to obtaining additional information about their academic activities that represented their student experiences in class and out of class. Transcripts also served to validate the accuracy of (GPAs) and to authenticate if students were not transfer students from another four year university or community college.
Interview Data Analysis

The data analysis process was iterative and ongoing throughout this study (Miles & Huberman, 1984). All interviews were transcribed verbatim as spoken by the student, by a professional transcriptionist and I immediately following each meeting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Students verified the transcripts and sent back corrections and corrected words and phrases that were deemed inaudible. The data analysis procedures consistent with phenomenology as stated by Moustakas (1994) involved organizing the material that was received from the demographic questionnaire, photographs, and student verbal summaries, interview transcripts, analytical memos, and field notes, as well as unofficial transcripts. I used large pieces of chart paper and placed these papers on the wall. I then wrote out all themes that emerged from the data. I placed the information in broad categories, and then collapsed the categories into manageable chunks of information and selected the most frequently occurring themes that spoke to the essence of the women’s perceptions.

As described in Chapter three, I used two theoretical frameworks to analyze data. The theoretical frameworks (i.e. BFT (Collins, 2000, 2009) and Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) chosen for this study informed my data analysis process in that BFT addressed how historical, educational, and societal experiences of AAUW have been shaped by intersections of their race, sexism, and class. Phenomenological data analysis gave voice to the participants and put in context the interpretation of their perspectives. Engagement theory indicates that students benefit from educationally purposeful activities (Kuh et al., 2005). The literature indicates that African American students benefit most from interaction with faculty in the forms of communicating about academic work, course selection, and career plans (Einarson & Clarkberg, 2010). However, the authors note that social out-of-class interaction with faculty does not have the same
mediating effects on African American students as it does with students of other races (Einarson & Clarkberg, 2010). Analyzing data from the interviews of these participants illuminated the impact of academic and social experiences in college and how they impacted different subgroups.

Patton (1990) outlines steps to follow when analyzing data to identify the essence of the shared experience that is under investigation. Data analysis involved four preparatory steps, including 1) bracketing my preconceived notions concerning the phenomenon under investigation, 2) reading and rereading the interview transcripts, 3) highlighting sentences, quotes, and significant statements that provided understanding of the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990), 4) and identifying clusters of meaning from the significant quotes, sentences, and statements. These statements were generated into themes (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 1990). I then produced a textural description (description of what the participants experienced), followed by a structural description, which expressed the context or setting for the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). I then wrote a full description that presented the essence of the phenomenon experienced by the participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). All audio recording and transcripts were secured on a password-protected computer and locked in a file cabinet that was accessible to my dissertation advisor and me.

**Trustworthiness/Rigor**

In order to establish trustworthiness, which Creswell (2013) says is critical in qualitative research, I employed the following procedures: 1) member-checking, 2) peer-debriefing, 3) bracketing, and 4) triangulation. Member-checking (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013) was used to provide the participants with opportunities to review the contents of the transcripts in order to maintain accuracy and clarify the content. Peer-
debriefing allowed me to solicit the help of a knowledgeable colleague to review the data (Creswell, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2011). As discussed in the previous section, I bracketed my biases and presuppositions, as an African American woman, in order to ensure that the perceptions of the participants were described (Groenewald, 2004). I also used triangulation of multiple sources of data to permit the participants to reexamine and process events in a systematic manner. Some students were not as talkative as others at the beginning of the interviews. Allowing students’ opportunities to respond using various media leveled the playing field in terms of eliciting responses from participants. Additionally, triangulation of multiple data sources (e. g. transcripts, interviews, photographs, questionnaires, and analytical notes) assisted in establishing validity of findings when analysis occurred (Creswell, 2013). The women were from different levels of matriculation at the university; some lived on campus and some lived off campus with parents or other students, some were Resident assistants and some participants worked both on jobs on and off campus.

Rigor in a qualitative study is necessary to ensure that adequate amounts of data appropriate to the study are collected and analyzed by the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The steps I took to ensure rigor were: selecting African American undergraduate women from multiple settings at UCJ, using multiple methods to better understand their experiences as college students. The participants had the opportunity to verify the data by reviewing the initial drafts of the interview transcripts; I used a secondary reader who was knowledgeable about the research topic throughout my data collection and analysis process.

**Role of the Researcher**

Because I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, I stated my biases (through bracketing) up front as the research process began. In order to get to
the essence of what the participants were saying about their perspective, I bracketed myself again during transcription and analysis of the interviews (Groenewald, 2004). Because of my own race as a self-identified African American woman who experienced educational successes and challenges, it was important for me not to project on the participants my own biases. I used self-talk to reflect the participants point of view while subduing my own notions and preconceptions. I was conscious of the power imbalance between the participants and myself as a professional, and they as students. I positioned myself and the physical surroundings like chairs, and tables to minimize any imbalance of power. Also, I was conscious of my age difference between the college women and myself. I listened to their words and language and used the terms they used when speaking to them and questioning. I considered my manner of dress as not to restrict the women’s ability to develop rapport with me and begin to speak freely. Rather than dressing in a business suit, I dressed casually in slacks, or a skirt and a top. For example, Drew, a sophomore/ majoring in Political Economy commented that she usually wears sweats every day, but wore jeans to our interview, “I wanted to dress up for you” as she chuckles.

The participants and I established rapport quickly, and all nine of them seemed at ease with me. They opened up eagerly and told their stories one by one with commonalities of themes resonating throughout each narrative about their engagement challenges and successes. All nine participants came to both interview sessions and stayed the amount of time required to complete the session, which ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. I was very conscious of the participants’ time constraints, and I respected that. I did not need to guide the women if the conversation felt as though we were getting off topic. Most women corrected themselves and brought the conversation back to the focus of the study.
The previous section detailed the methods used in my study. I discussed why a phenomenological approach was best suited for this study. Furthermore, details of how participants were recruited, how many interviews were held and the importance of ensuring the accuracy and credibility of my findings were described.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of the design of the study, data analysis, ethical considerations, steps taken to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of findings, and role of the researcher. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will detail participant biographical information and describe the findings of this study.
Chapter 5

A Portrait of Our Personal and Academic Trajectories

In this chapter, I provide demographic, historical familial information, and academic data on each participant. As African American undergraduate women are not a monolithic group, I found similarities and differences in their backgrounds and engagement practices. In addition, I share descriptions of the photographs three of the participants shared with me related to their perceptions of engagement. The photographs provided additional data and stimulated thoughts from participants that may not otherwise have been brought forth.

**Brief Demographic Summaries**

Prior to presenting brief biographical sketches of the participants, I summarize general tendencies of the group with respect to family background, matriculation level, and socio-economics status. More detailed information about each participant’s family, socio-economic status and matriculation will be described in their individual biological sketches.

**Family Background**

Although the women all self-identified as African American undergraduates, their individual ethnic identities were more diverse. Some participants added that they were mixed race, with one parent being African American and another either Asian, or East Indian. Two students’ parents moved from Cameroon and Nigeria before their birth, and therefore consider themselves to be African American and Nigerian American. A more detailed description of the participants’ family background will be discussed in the following section titled Participants’ Biographical Information.
Matriculation Level

All of the participants were upperclassmen. Four of the undergraduate women participants were sophomores, while four were juniors, and one was a senior. One other senior had to leave the study because she went on a study abroad assignment. Five of the participants are the first in their families to attend college. Others had family members who had completed college. Participants whose family had members with college degrees reported that they either had a parent or other family member(s) attend college and graduate with a bachelor’s or master’s degree.

Socioeconomic Status

Although questions concerning socioeconomic status were not asked of the participants directly, during the course of conversations in the interviews, they indicated their families’ status. Interestingly, socioeconomic status did not always dictate participants’ exposure to cross-racial social and academic engagement during their pre-college years. Additionally, participants felt that they had to make their own financial contribution to their college expenses, (e.g. paying for books, housing and the cost of transportation to and from campus) regardless of status. Bailey and Elena had siblings matriculating at other colleges simultaneously; and the expectations on their part was that they would work to make sure they could cover their expenses and lessen the hardship on their families. Although the high cost of attendance at UC J was stressful, all of the participants felt privileged to be enrolled in such a prestigious university.

Participants’ Biographical Sketches

The following is a description of the individual biographical sketches of each of the nine women who participated in the study:
Bailey

Bailey is a 20-year-old junior, born and raised in Northern California, majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies, and minoring in African American Studies. She attended a public high school in Northern California in her hometown of Sydney. Bailey comes from a middle-class background and lived in a two-parent household. She is the youngest of four girls. Two older sisters have graduated from universities in the State of California and one older sister is presently matriculating at a state college in California other than the University of California at Joplin. Her mother and father attended the University of California at Joplin, where they received their Bachelor of Arts degrees. Bailey was actively engaged in her high school. She participated in cheerleading and the National Honor Society. She applied to colleges in and out of state during her senior year of high school. She was awarded four-year scholarships to other out-of-state colleges, but the deciding factor in choosing UC Joplin was its closeness to home. She is close to her family and enjoys being able to visit with them as much as she can.

Bailey knew some information about the university before enrolling. She had expected there not to be a lot of African American students whom she would know because of the low percentage of African American students enrolled at the campus. She had attended a summer program at UC Joplin as a high school student and stayed for a couple of days in the residence hall, so she knew a bit about the college and the undergraduate programs and majors. While visiting the campus, she found out about the Afro Theme Floor where freshmen could live, and she signed up for it and lived in that community. Knowing that she wanted to major in business, and the university had a good business program, this prospect aroused her interest. She found that knowing other African American women could help out a lot as a support system. Bailey explained that with such low numbers of AAUW attending the school, she thought that she would not be
able to find other AAUW to connect with. Just walking around campus and seeing familiar faces was helpful as a social support for her. Bailey has earned a GPA of 3.0.

Drew

Drew is a 19-year-old sophomore from Southern California, majoring in Political Economy, and minoring in African American Studies. Her entire schooling experience has been in prestigious schools; schools where children of movie stars attended and where the tuition was $34,000 or more per year. She attended several different private Christian schools for elementary, middle, and high schools. She is from a one-parent household, but states that her mother and father co-parent, and she is more a part of a blended family. Her father has remarried, and she has younger siblings, one of which she has never seen, because her sister was recently born within four months. Neither of her parents attended this university, and she is a first-generation college student. Both of her parents, particularly her mother, have made sure that her education was of very high quality. She [her mother] would seek out every type of financial resource to defray the cost of Drew’s $34,000 yearly tuition cost for private elite schools, and would end up paying only $900 to $1,000 for the entire cost of the school year.

Drew was fortunate to have had a White male counsel/mentor, Mr. Lavery in high school who recognized her hard work in academics, social activities in school and the Black community. He [Mr. Lavery] was instrumental in securing financial support for Drew’s college expenses. Drew was highly engaged in academic and social extracurricular activities in high school. These activities included: participation in community college courses, Advanced Placement courses, theatre club, Club HOPE, and student government. She continues to stay in contact with her high school mentor. When she has questions, her mentor has been there to support her long distance. Drew believes because she was an only child living at home with her mother, and was content
to be by herself, she developed comfort with the lack of much social engagement. Since she has come to college, she has gotten better at networking and forming relationships with faculty and students. These are skills that Drew has learned since coming to college, and she plans to put networking to good use in her future plans. She is financing her college education through financial aid, grants, and scholarships. Drew has earned a GPA of 3.89.

**Elena**

Elena is a 19-year-old sophomore from Southern California, majoring in Business Administration, and minoring in African American Studies. She attended public school in her hometown of Franklinville. Elena comes from a single-parent home. She has four siblings, including an older sister, a younger sister, a younger brother, and an adopted brother who is her cousin, but was adopted by her mother, Sylvia, when his mother died. This male cousin, John attended the University of California at Joplin previously. Her mother has some college credits, and her father has a Bachelor's degree. Elena was engaged in many activities in high school. These activities included small business management club, basketball team, leadership class, Black student union, California Voices choir, and rugby, tennis, and CHANGE club.

Elena’s favorite hobbies are reading and watching movies. She read 15 books during the most recent summer months. Since school is in session, she has not had time to read for pleasure at all, but instead is occupied with reading for academics. During her senior year of high school, Elena applied to schools in California and Harvard University. She initially intended to matriculate at an out of state university, however, her mind was changed to consider coming to an in state college.

Elena came to a visit UC J, and was convinced to attend the institution because of her visit to the Afro Theme Floor. Coming to UC J, she found it refreshing to have
people outside of her family with whom she could talk. She did not find the curriculum excessively challenging during her first year on campus. Because she had not had good social experiences of engagement in middle and high school because she had associated with students that got in trouble and would always put her down verbally, she looked forward to coming to college. Elena’s financial aid package covers mostly all of her basic needs. She took out a $2,000 loan her first year, and compared to most other women she knew, she sensed that is a very small amount. Elena stated that her family, particularly her mother, Sylvia, was her biggest supporter. Elena is financing her college education through her father, Roger’s Military/Veterans benefits, financial aid, grants, work study, scholarships, work on campus, and work off campus. Elena has earned a GPA of 3.19.

**Erykah**

Erykah is a 21-year-old senior, double-majoring in Psychology and Molecular Biology. She attended a public high school in Northern California. Erykah is an only child and is the first in her family to attend college. Neither of her parents attended college. Erykah and her family made a major move from her hometown of Copult, that she had known since birth, and moved about 20 miles to a new town, Henderson for her sixth through 12th grade years, and lived with her grandmother. She described herself as an introvert and deep thinker. Therefore, she did not engage in social activities very much with women of her own age, nor make new friends at her new educational settings. Her grandmother was employed by the school system where Erykah was a student, and her tutelage had a major impact on Erykah’s schooling. Her grandmother passed away before she entered college. She admits that going through college without her grandmother’s presence had a detrimental effect on her motivation. She was attending college for her own benefit, but the fact that her grandmother was not here, she does not
feel the joy the same. Erykah had lived on campus in the residence halls at one time as an under classmen. She now lives with her mother off-campus during college.

Her hobbies include reading and going to the gym. Self-designating herself as an avid reader, once she entered college, she had no time for reading for pleasure. Since she is a senior and has met most of her requirements, and she has a grasp on her time management, she is getting back into reading for pleasure again. Passersby often ask her what she is reading. Reading had served as a way to enter into others’ world since she felt she did not initiate engagement with people and this caused her to feel isolated at times. She emphasized that her sense of isolation is compounded by the fact that she has difficulty making connections with others. It is hard for her to meet people and make new friends. Erykah has plans to pursue a career in psychotherapy and practice natural medicine. She would like to be of benefit to the African American community in some way after graduation. Erykah is financing her college education through family contributions, scholarships, financial aid, and work on campus. Erykah has earned a GPA of 3.21.

**Jasmine**

Jasmine is a 21-year-old junior. She is a native of Southern California, majoring in Social Welfare. She attended public high school in her hometown of Atari. Neither of her parents attended college, nor did any of her siblings. She is the youngest of the six siblings and was raised first by her older sister, Terry, who was 20 years old at the time; to avoid being put into the foster care system. Jasmine felt that her sister was so young when she took in all the siblings that it caused a very stressful situation for everyone involved. Because of the stress of lack of financial resources, her older sister had to relinquish care of her when she was entering high school, and Jasmine then moved in with her grandparents. She was relieved to be with her maternal grandparents to get away from the emotional and financial stress surrounding her home life.
Jasmine was a very engaged student in high school, both academically and in extracurricular activities. She was a member of student government, class senate, cheerleading, track, African American Female Initiative Club, Key Club, and California Scholarship Federation. Jasmine admits that she knew nothing about the University of California at Joplin before coming to the school. However, during her senior year of high school, she applied to out-of-state schools and all of the schools in the University of California system. After applying on a whim and getting accepted, she was invited to come to UC Joplin and interview for a scholarship. She thought she would attend the interview and just go through the process of the interview, thinking the scholarship would be about $2,500 or so. To her surprise, she was awarded a scholarship for a full-ride to the university. Jasmine reports that after she received the scholarship, everything changed in her college decision-making process. She admitted to learning about the steep academics at UC Joplin. What was a surprise for her were the student demographics of the campus environment, as far as the low number of African American students on campus and the small amount of African American women. Jasmine believes that she has not found her niche, and does not fit in certain circles; however, she is still searching for her place to feel comfortable.

She continues to be an involved student in college, just as she was in high school. She serves as a Resident Assistant, and an engaged member of the National Council of Negro Women. Jasmine has been the recipient of the Chancellor’s Leadership Award. She considers an African American female advisor, Ms. Saunders, in the African American Studies Department, at UC Joplin one of her staunchest supporters. She has developed a relationship with this Black woman, and seeks her out for advice many aspects of her life. Jasmine is financing her education through scholarships and work on campus. Jasmine has earned a GPA of 3.3.
Lara

Lara is a 20-year-old junior from Southern California, majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies and Rhetoric. She attended public high school in the city of Kimball, in Southern California. Neither of her parents have a college degree; but her father has some college credits. She has three younger brothers. Despite the struggle to be engaged in her predominantly White high school because of constant conflict with students and staff that held very conservative view points, Lara was heavily engaged in academic and social activities. She participated in marching band, symphonic band, track and field, national honor society, student government, Black Student Union, step team, link crew, and volunteered at the public library in her home town.

Lara participated in a Summer Bridge program before entering UC Joplin. She feels that the boost this experience gave her was well worth it. She was encouraged by being in a community of other women of color who were also transitioning to the new collegiate environment. One benefit among many that Lara feels she gained from this summer experience was to encourage other African American undergraduate women to become engaged in the Afro Theme Floor. She wishes to take freshmen women under her wing and show them around campus. Just as she encourages other African American undergraduate women to get engaged, she knows that it is important for her to stay academically and socially engaged, and to set high academic standards for herself. Lara admits that her younger brothers look to her as a role model. Being a role model fuels her desire to be academically successful, to show that hard work can pay off. Lara states that her mother is her biggest ally. She is financing her college education through loans, on-campus work, and being a Resident Assistant. Lara has earned a GPA of 3.1.
Lucille

Lucille is a 20-year-old Nigerian-American junior from Southern California, majoring in Public Health, and minoring in education. She attended public school in her home town of Chrisley. She is from a two-parent household. Her mother holds a bachelor's degree and her father holds a master's degree. She is the first member of her family to attend UC Joplin. Both her parents attended other universities in Nigeria. Before coming to college, she [Lucille] was a highly engaged student, participating in college peer counseling, peer mediation, women’s soccer, and served as president of Evers/Parks Magnet High School organization against cancer. She was not very socially engaged in high school with anyone (i.e. going to parties, or going on dates with males). Her social activities were limited to same-gender students. Lucille comments that she was seen as the nerdy Black girl. She never had a date to the prom and recalls how hurt she felt about it.

Having academic and social support in order to do well academically was very important to Lucille. She admits to that she experienced some challenging times in college. Her challenges were due to her lack of utilizing study resources as much as she could have. However, she did improve that academic engagement practice by going to tutoring, and is doing better in her chemistry class. Lucille saw African American women peers, faculty, and staff as her biggest supporters. Lucille in turn tried to get other African American undergraduate women engaged in meaningful academic and social activities of the university, because she knew from past experiences how beneficial it was to make those connections. She is financing her college education through financial aid from the university in the forms of grants and scholarships. Additionally, she works on campus, holding two jobs and has taken out loans. Lucille has earned a GPA of 3.1.
Melissa

Melissa is a 19-year-old sophomore, majoring in Computer Science and Psychology. She attended a preparatory charter high school in Southern California that she admits was lacking in resources. She is from a two-parent household. Her father has a bachelor’s degree, while her mother has some college credits. She had a cousin to previously graduate from the University of California at Joplin, and earned both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the university. Melissa’s older brother had attended UC Las Colinas, and she did not wish to go there because it was already very familiar to her. She felt that her brother’s school was too close to home. Although her high school lacked financial backing and was constantly on the verge of closing each year, she was an academically and socially engaged student. Melissa was not inhibited from being an engaged student in high school; participating in extracurricular activities such as student government, the basketball team, and was the initiator of a math club in the school.

She participated in a college program for high school students in Southern California. During this two week program, she lived with college freshmen and participated in American College Testing (ACT) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) test preparation. She had lived on campus on the Afro Theme Floor, but now presently resides off campus in an apartment. She is financing her education through financial aid, work study, grants, and work on campus. She has earned a GPA of 3.0.

Storm

Storm is a 20-year-old junior. She is not a native Californian, and hails from a Southern state. She attended a magnet high school in her state. She lived in a single-parent household with her mother and grandparents also lived there. Both her mother and father have bachelor’s degrees and are members of Black Greek Letter
Organizations. She has one older sister who is seven years her senior. Her maternal
grandpa was her father figure, and they had a close relationship. He passed away
Storm’s junior year of high school, and she admits that his passing took an emotional toll
on her. She participated in many extracurricular activities in high school. These activities
included Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp (JROTC), Beta Club, dance team, chorus,
and color guard. Storm had plans of joining the Air Force, but because of her respiratory
problems, she let go of that dream.

Storm explained that she had never left her home state before coming to college.
She credits her White male literature teacher, Mr. Bourne, from high school as the driving
force behind expanding her college selection process to schools on the West coast.
Storm is glad that she has broadened her horizons in a different locale. She is honored
that her academic and social engagement helped her to get into such a prestigious
university. She is financing her college education through financial aid, work study,
grants, and work on and off campus. Storm has earned a GPA of 3.3.

Summary

This study provided biographical information on each of the nine AAUW that
participated in the study. The nine AAUW in this study came from various academic and
social backgrounds. Although each of them possessed a GPA above 3.0 in high school,
some of them had GPAs in excess of 4.0. All of the participants were engaged in
academic and social engagement activities, and they relied on peers, teachers and family
members as a means to networking in order to foster their academic achievement. The
next section will detail description of the usefulness and relevance of photo data is
provided in the next section. Additionally, contents of the photo sharing portion of the
interviews are provided.
Photo Data

As I mentioned earlier in the methodology section of my research design chapter, I used photographs as a method to explore these African American Undergraduate Women’s perspectives concerning their definitions of engagement. All participants were asked to supply photographs, but only three remembered to bring the photos to the second interview session. Narrative summation of information I gathered in the photograph sessions is described below.

Participants were asked to share six photographs, three representing their academic, and three representing their social engagement practices (See Appendix H). During their second interview, photographs were used as a means of further exploring participants’ perceptions that represented their engagement practices in and out of class that facilitated their academic achievement. The beginning of the second interview began with my thanking the participants for the first interview and returning for the second and final interview. The interview began with my asking if they brought photographs with them and if they would not mind sharing these photographs and talking about the activity and people depicted in the pictures.

I used photographs as a way to allow participants to share their own verbal commentaries about how they perceived engagement, which engagement activities in which they participated, and what engagement meant to them. I asked questions about the people and the settings depicted in the pictures. A typical response from me while the sharing session was taking place was “You like sharing these photos and I can see the people and activities shown are important to you.” While there were interchanges between the participants and I throughout the photo interviews, I let them [participants] do most of the talking. The used of this method of inquiry proved to be non-threatening, and participants shared information that they may have not in any other forum. I did not set
many parameters for the activity, other than the pictures must mean academic and social 
engagement to the participant. I asked them to tell those individuals [friends, parents, and 
teachers] in the pictures that they [participants] would be sharing the photographs with 
me. The discussion of the photographs was meant to be free flowing. I noted during the 
session whether the images denoted positive or negative engagement. All three 
participants had a positive experience with the activity, and were able to express their 
perceptions of how the pictures symbolized their academic and social engagement 
before and during college in and outside the classroom.

Three AAUW from the study, Drew, Elena, and Lucille, provided verbal 
descriptions of the images and activities reflected in the photographs. In addition to using 
photographs to elicit information from the women about their engagement in a non-
threatening manner, scholars have described that it is helpful for a researcher, when 
conducting research with African American women by African American women, that the 
researcher use multiple forms of data collection (e.g. music, journaling, visual 
representations of events, clothing). Using this form of visual representation of events 
coincides with research detailing how this method is useful (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; 
Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003; Harper, 2002; Keegan, 
2008; Schulze, 2007). Keegan (2008) states that still photographs help participants to be 
more expressive verbally, and are used as a tool to begin the conversation about a 
particular topic. Consistent with literature by Harper (2002), concerning the use of 
photographs as a means to elicit verbal commentary through visual expressions, this 
practice allowed participants to bring to the forefront deeper elements of their 
consciousness, held true in my study. The discussion during the photograph sharing was 
done in the context of academic and social engagement. The content of the three 
interviews follow:
Drew

Drew presented still-life photographs depicting her mother, father, mentor, a girlfriend, and herself. The position of people in the photograph are her mother to the left of Drew, her mentor next to her right, and her father standing to the right of her mentor. Although her father does not live with her, he and Drew have a close relationship, and he is supportive of her. She reports “I keep in contact with my father, although I do not see him as often as I would like.” Drew seems proud of her engagement and lights up when she is giving her report of what is happening in the photograph. She reports that her mentor, Mr. Lavery is still active in her life, and credits him, since he is a UC Joplin alumnus, with being instrumental in her deciding to come to this university. Mr. Lavery is the sponsor of the scholarship she receives while attending this UC Joplin. In my analytical notes, I jotted down that Mr. Lavery serves as a continuous support person for her, although his support comes from long distance. He is still instrumental in Drew’s academic success. He provides advice and monitoring (keeps up with her grades and talks with her about how she is succeeding academically) to her, as well as providing her with networking possibilities to meet other students at the university and an opportunity to serve in a student leadership role. For example, Drew served as associate to the senator of Associated Students at University of California (ASUC). Through this position, she worked on the Informing Galvanizing not Incarceration Transforming Education (IGNITE) campaign to end the school to prison pipeline and stop mass incarceration. She credits being considered for and gaining this position as a result of her connections with him as a UC J alumnus.

Another of her photographs shows the image of Drew receiving an award and holding her certificate with both hands out in front of her. She received this award while in high school. I thought to myself as I viewed the images, how much younger Drew looked
in the picture, and how she has changed to look more mature, now that she is in college. Her parents and mentor are in this picture too. She speaks about how each of the individuals in the photograph still impacts her academic journey, and how the support she receives from each person helps her to achieve in some manner.

Although Drew considers herself a person who spends a considerable amount of time alone, she does have a close connection with one of her girlfriends. She shows the image of Elaine in the second photograph. They are smiling and have their faces close to one another. The two of them are not doing anything particular, but just standing together. She chose this picture to show who she engages with on a social basis. When Drew does engage in social activities, more often than not, Elaine and she can be found together. She and Elaine had a friendship that started before coming to college and they keep in contact with one another, even though they are not at the same university.

**Elena**

Elena chose to share numerous pictures of her family on her laptop computer. She considers her family to be very close knit, and serves as her most supportive academic and social mechanism for achievement. Her pictures included her mother Sylvia, aunts, brothers, sisters, roommates, members of her business club, and boyfriend. She spoke of how she and Sasha, and Ashley are always engaging in social activities together, noting “We have lots of social gatherings together and we go to events together.” She reports that if she goes to an activity that is social in nature, more than likely she takes Sasha and Ashley with her. She states in a soft-spoken voice: “That’s always been great, that I felt like I always had someone.” She credits her older sister, Sasha for being there for her to fall back on. The support that she received from Sasha and Sylvia buffered anything else that was negative that may have taken place in her life. Elena says “If no one at UC Joplin liked me and couldn’t stand me, it doesn’t matter
because I have my sister." The next set of pictures showed countless portraits of Sylvia. Elena talked about how Sylvia motivated her verbally to excel. For instance, Sylvia boosted Elena’s self-esteem by reminding her [Elena] of how beautiful she was and how she had the ability to do anything she sets her mind to.

Elena also shared photographs of her boyfriend, Simon, who attends Pierre Aquinas University within the state. She credited Simon with helping her to choose better friendship circles, emphasizing her need to surround herself with people who are not jealous of her, and who promote academic excellence and positive career aspirations. As I mentioned earlier, Elena brought in more than the six required pictures. I did not interrupt her while she was giving her verbal commentary, except to say “I can see that your family is important to you.” While showing pictures of Simon, Elena recounted the time when she lost her best friend, Vivienne, because of jealousy over Simon, explaining “We are not friends anymore. She tried to interfere in our relationship and get him to break up with me.” Elena relayed that Vivienne secretly wanted Simon as her boyfriend instead. Elena seems matter of fact about the breakup of her friendship with Vivienne. She continued to reflect on how much her social engagement centers around her family commenting, “You see I have all these pictures. As far as Simon’s family, they have been instrumental as well. I didn’t realize until hindsight.” She presented one or two pictures of her dad Roger, because she believes that he is there, but not. She believes he is not physically, emotionally, or mentally available to her to provide her support. The last of Elena’s vast array of photographs entail images of on campus friends and members of organizations she engages in. She shared pictures of her roommates, members of her college business club, and friends just hanging out. In some of the photographs that depicted members of her business club, Hammond University Black Business Association (HUBBA) she reports:
I do engage academically in studying with people that I have pre-requisites together. We hold each other accountable. I engage most through HUBBA and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). I like to dance, but that’s it. I don’t like the other side of partying (e.g. drinking).

Elena took much pride in displaying the photographs of people most instrumental in her academic and social engagement off campus, namely, Ashley, Sasha, Simon and Sylvia. Like most of the other participants in the study, her on campus academic and social engagement activities are limited to same race and gender peers. Because of previous feelings of rejection and lack of collaboration from classmates unlike herself, non-African American women, she limits her engagement practices to involvement with other African American students, mostly women.

Lucille

Lucille brought in still-life pictures that showed how she engages academically and socially inside and outside of the classroom. Her face lit up as she talked about her work associates in the photographs, and how these people impacted her engagement in some way. Her pictures included collages from her work environment and classmates. Lucille serves as a resident assistant in the residence hall, an employee of the African American Recruitment Center, and sometimes as a monitor for students taking exams; when she needs extra money. Interestingly, she provided a picture of her Asian male chemistry partner, Nikko. As a result of being paired for lab work by the class instructor, they not only work together in class, but also have developed a mutual friendship. Lucille states “Well, the thing about that, Bernice, I’m the only Black student in the class. So, at least he was my friend, he was the only person I know in that course.” Lucille admits that she is not likely to engage with other Black women in a classroom setting because there are so few Black women in the science department and her major. The lack of a critical
mass of African American students in general, and specifically AAUW in the sciences at the university causes her to seek tutoring, study jams, and Black faculty for assistance. Lucille explains that her classes are very large, about 200 students, and there is always the chance that there are only a few or no Black students or AAUW in her classes. However, when the classes are broken down into discussion groups of about 20 students, which are assigned on the students’ schedules, since there are so few Black students in the sciences and her classes, she is usually the only Black student participating in a discussion group.

Lucille continues to speak about her social engagement. She shows photographs of two co-workers and her from the Black Recruitment Center. She explains “they’re like co-directors with me, and they’re also my closest friends.” The three women are pictured in the Multi-Cultural Community Center striking a pose standing side by side. Other pictures show Black women participating at a banquet at the university. Lucille comments:

I think that my closest groups of friends are all Black women. It just happened to be like that. That’s where I get my support system from. I think I don’t have many male friends, but that has to do with my own personal dynamics.

Lucille segues into telling the story of being considered a smart girl in high school, and none of the males wanted to date her. She admits to not having a boyfriend on campus. For Lucille, having support from others is the biggest motivator of her academic and social engagement. She believes that without the support of the staff of the recruitment center and work colleagues in the residence hall, college would not be a very positive place for her, and her academic achievement would suffer.

The three participants that shared their photographs during the second semi-structured interviews did so with much enthusiasm. I especially enjoyed that they took
center stage during the sharing process and were in charge of this interchange; as I took a back seat to them during this phase of the interviews. All of the images that were presented in the photographs that the women shared were mostly of other African American females; exceptions included images of Drew’s parents and Mr. Lavery and Lucille’s chemistry lab partner, Nikko who was an Asian male.

**Summary**

In this chapter I presented the individual biographical sketches of each participant along with a discussion of the photo interview provided by each AAUW to clarify their personal perceptions of academic and social engagement in the collegiate environment. In using these data to understand the perceptions of participants, I am highlighting how they perceive their engagement inside and outside of classroom spaces at a predominantly White, elite, public, university setting.

In Chapter 6, I will highlight how these African American undergraduate women perceived their academic and social engagement practices at UC J.
Chapter 6

In Their Own Voices

In order to portray an accurate description of the meanings participants ascribed to the phenomenon of engagement, I used multiple types of data collection methods (e.g. analytical memos, demographic questionnaires, field notes, photographs, and semi-structured interviews). Giorgi (2009) stresses that the operational word in phenomenological research is description. The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, abstaining from any pre-given bias, but remaining true to the facts. As such, the descriptive information about the participants gathered from the semi-structured interviews are highlighted in this chapter.

The following section speaks to what each AAUW perceived engagement to be and how this engagement manifested itself in and outside of classroom settings. The purpose of my phenomenological study was to illuminate the perceptions of African American undergraduate women about how engagement influenced their academic achievement. The criteria for eligibility to participate in the study were: self-identification as an African American woman, not being a transfer student from a junior college or another four-year university, and having a grade point average of 3.0 or above. The overarching goal of my study was to describe the influence of both academic and social engagement on African American women as it pertains to their academic achievement at a predominantly White, elite, and public university in Northern California. The study employed the phenomenological methodology; data were analyzed through the lenses of Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009). These theoretical frameworks were used to assist me in understanding the participants’ perspectives.
This study is a phenomenological study, and as such, the purpose was to describe engagement experiences of nine African American undergraduate women at an elite, predominantly white university from their perspective. In order to capture the unique experiences and perceptions from the participants concerning their perception of academic and social engagement practices, the following research question was posed:  

1) What are African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of their academic and social engagement practices at the University of California at Joplin?  

These women described what they perceived engagement to mean to them. The findings are analyzed through the lenses of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) and Engagement theory (Kuh et al., 2005). The following section details information gained from the nine participants, where four major themes emerged from the data analysis of the interviews for all participants and photograph analysis for three participants. These four themes were: 1) Perceptions of Academic and Social Engagement, subthemes: a) proactive academic engagement, and b) perceived hindrances to academic engagement, 2) Forming Bonds with Women as an Engagement Practice, subthemes: a) forming bonds with AAUW, and b) forming bonds with women of other races, 3) Perceived Challenges to Engagement, and 4) Finances and their Influence on Engagement and Achievement, subtheme; Financial hardship. Using the frameworks of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) and Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) permitted me to capture thick rich data from AAUW that delineated perceptions of academic and social engagement practices and the perceived influence on their academic achievement.

**Academic and Social Engagement**

The current section details the perceptions that the AAUW ascribed to the implication of what academic and social engagement means to them. The most profound
findings from the interviews were that these women were elated and grateful to me for allowing their voices to be heard and will be made a part of the recent scholarship on this population. They all acknowledged that this research study was worthy and needed. They could not stop thanking me enough for shifting the paradigm from one focused on lower retention and graduation rates, poor academic performance and lower college preparedness and qualification to one of high academic achievement and successful matriculation through their engagement stories. These women shared their academic journeys prior to and during college.

**Academic Engagement**

All nine of the participants discussed their engagement both academically and socially. Each participant had her own idea of what engagement meant to her while matriculating at the university. Some described how they had been heavily involved in sports, student government, and National Honor Society in high school. One of the themes that resonated throughout the interviews with most participants was the perception that engagement was related to one or all of the constructs presented in Kuh et al. (2005) Engagement Theory, 1) getting actively involved in class by contributing to discussions with peers, 2) further researching the information presented in class, 3) applying what was learned to real life situations and, 4) seeking out all available resources to help them when they [AAUW] needed to.

Most of these women had similar definitions of how they conceptualized their academic and social engagement. Some common subthemes among the perceptions shared were: proactive engagement and academic achievement and perceived hindrances to academic engagement. All nine AAUW spoke about how required their application of the material they learned in class.
Storm was the first student to participate in the interviews, which included questions about the meanings of academic and social engagement. While reviewing her definitions, many of the same words were conveyed by other participants who were interviewed later on. Storm described her perception of academic engagement. She used the terms apply and applied several times in her definition. These terms were consistent with examples given by other AAUW in their definitions of academic engagement. For example, she commented:

I feel like academic, or true academic engagement is how you can apply like those concepts in the material that are presented in class and those different theories and all the knowledge that you’ll learn in these books to real life and outside of like the classroom experiences. And so… I would, yeah define academic engagement as yeah, being able to relate and then apply those concepts.

All AAUW felt that using their networks through organizations provided opportunities for engagement that they [AAUW] would not ordinarily have. All other AAUW in the study were involved with organizations on campus and the university community at large.

Like all other AAUW in the study, Storm perceived that academic engagement entailed taking in information that was being given to her and then incorporating that information into some type of action. Furthermore Storm saw academic engagement as being related to the ability to recognize concepts taught in classroom material when it is presented again or elsewhere in another context. She believed that the student is not a passive member of the engagement process, but acts upon information that she has gleaned from material presented in an academic context.
AAUW considered that becoming socially engaged with different organizations was a way of using their engagement in these organizations as a platform to bring about positive outcomes. Like other AAUW, Storm commented that the larger campus community and the smaller Black community are in stark contrast when it comes to engagement opportunities for her. Her engagement in various activities in different organizations provides an outlet for her to engage socially with diverse groups of individuals and components of college life. Additionally, Storm is engaged with the campus chapter of the National Council of Negro Women and a frequent engager with the Black Recruitment and Retention Center. Another engagement practice in which Storm participates includes serving as an upper classmen mentor to other students as a part of a program at Stone Hall on campus.

All the AAUW in the study believed that engaging in different spaces has helped them to achieve academically in the classroom. Because more than one of the participants have taken it upon themselves to help freshmen, it reinforces for them how important it is for African American women to have someone to talk to and guide them through the beginning of their college lives. Storm illustrated this point, noting, “I want them [underclassmen AAUW] to have that because I didn’t have that when I first came here. I’m not a local resident so that limits my social engagement. I’m not familiar with the area.” Being unfamiliar with the area restricts her engagement in the Joplin community.

All of the AAUW, just like Storm, are engaged in several activities and organizations on campus that are more geared toward engaging with same race and gender peers. All other participants echoed same and similar definitions for the term engagement. For example, Lara explained that she does multiple things at one time, and has always been a highly engaged student, academically. When asked what academic engagement meant to her, she replied:
Academic engagement to me means that I put all of my focus into my work. Making sure, I’m doing exactly what I’m supposed to be doing, whether its papers [or] things like that. Engagement is not just doing your work, but participating in class. Ask questions and get your questions answered. It may be a little intimidating sometimes.

Like many of the AAUW in the study, Lara believes that all students attend college for similar reasons. It is important for her to take part in discussions and listen to what others have to say. She is not reticent to state her opinion and believes if a student has listened to something or witnessed something that they do not agree with, it is fine to express that. Lara goes on to say that social engagement for some students means that you have to be in a club or organization. She believes that, as long as you have a community, that perhaps people you see in class or maybe through an organization, it includes meeting and forming bonds with people inside and outside the classroom. Like Drew, Jasmine, Bailey and Melissa, Lara believes in being proactive in her engagement in the classroom and outside the classroom. She appears to be motivated to do what is necessary to achieve academically.

Similar to perceptions of other AAUW in the study, Lucille’s belief about what she perceived as academic and social engagement, repeats some of the same thoughts that Lara and Storm voiced in earlier conversations. Lucille stated that:

From my experience, I feel like academic engagement is not just sitting in the classroom and kind of, like absorbing what is heard. I’ve been thinking about this a lot. It’s really learning and applying the material to your daily life.
Lucille feels academic engagement goes beyond having the information thrown at you. She believes it is digesting the material and understanding it conceptually is most important. Beyond simply memorizing what you hear, but being able to teach someone the material is a whole different matter for her. In addition to sharing their perceptions of academic and social engagement, some of the AAUW described how they were able to foster enriching educational opportunities for themselves. If their educational setting could not provide all of the academic engagement activities they needed to supplement their academic achievement, they sought other avenues to foster their academic success. As the narratives from Lara, Lucille, and Storm revealed, AAUW were able to promote their own academic achievement because of their proactive engagement in which they solicited the help of human and institutional resources to help themselves. Whether the AAUW solicited help from and individual or groups in the collegiate community, they [AAUW] felt that it was important to be proactive in their academic engagement practices; taking advantage of all available resources known and those newly found [resources] to ensure their high academic achievement. AAUW in this study employed proactive strategies to help build their academic engagement.

**Proactive Academic Engagement**

The AAUW in this study employed proactive strategies to help support their academic engagement. The all found their own ways of accessing resources on campus and found means of using these resources to strengthen their academic engagement. AAUW shared similar and different perceptions around the manner in which their proactive forms of academic engagement manifested.

Lara previously shared her perceptions of what she believed to be academic engagement. Just as Lara had spoken of her perceptions, Bailey shared other thoughts
concerning how AAUW must be intentional about their efforts to ensure that their
guidance for the benefit of their academic achievement was not lacking on their parts.

Bailey and Lara, spoke of ways in which they were proactive about their
academic engagement. They deemed the practice of setting up appointments with
professors at office hours as a part of their academic engagement. Not only were
participants proactive with professors, but they saw graduate student instructors (GSIs)
as viable options to support their academic engagement. Some participants often worked
with GSIs whom they felt more comfortable, and spoke of changing their mode of
academic and social engagement since entering college. Bailey recalls on her
relationships with professors:

Me personally, if I have questions about academics, I usually go to some of the
professors or GSIs that I've gained a relationship with. I think there are so many
resources and programs that are available for any problem; it helps to get
information from someone I have a personal relationship with.

All AAUW believed that engaging with familiar staff and peers was a means of being
proactive in their engagement practices. The AAUW set their goal of academic
engagement and achievement as a priority while they were progressing through college.
For example, Bailey also spoke of getting so engaged in her academic work by focusing
on studying that during midterms, that it creates an unhealthy situation for her. She
admitted to not eating or sleeping for a couple of weeks during this period. Even with her
proactive engagement practices of conversing with and seeking help from professors and
GSIs, at times she is still unsure of how well she will do on the exams. She credits having
ambivalent feelings about her academic achievement to a lack of a sense of surety of
how she is doing in class.
However, like Bailey, Lara also was proactive in her engagement strategies to help promote her academic achievement. Lara comments about her high school and college proactive engagement practices. She reported that her senior year of high school was the year that she was going to engage in self-promotion. She tried to get elected to the Associated Student Body (ASU). The ASU was instrumental in making decisions that affected all aspects of student life at her high school. She did not garner an officer position, but was a committee member instead. She engaged in summer camp at UCJ her senior year of high school. She had the opportunity to enroll in five Advanced Placement (AP) classes and applied to the most prestigious colleges for admission. She reports:

Senior year was the year. I’m really competitive and I’m going to take advantage of all of my opportunities. I took advantage of an opportunity provided by UC Joplin to get assistance with writing my personal statement for the college essay. They flew my mom and me up for a weekend. My mom told me to focus on getting in to college and not focus on anything else; certainly not any of the hardships or people I had encountered in high school.

Lara’s statement above provided an important insight into the extra effort and persistence by AAUW to develop engagement strategies that support their academic achievement. Lara reported that she had two to three teachers that were supportive of her in school. She took advantage of their benevolence and solicited their help by getting feedback on her writing, conversing about possible majors in college, securing recommendations and advisement on college applications. She felt that she had to work hard and do whatever it took to get to get the highest academic marks and get into a good college. She reports that her mother reiterated a sense of proactive engagement,
commenting “If you just work hard and do what you need to do, you’ll get to where you want to be.” Lara felt that if she did not keep being proactive, she could easily become a victim to the oppressive environment that she was surrounded by in her school. She chose not to be a victim, but chose to be proactive in order to use her oppressive circumstances as a catalyst to motivate herself to turn her oppressive situation into an emancipatory one. Making a choice to be proactive about her engagement facilitated her achievement. Lara used the same type of proactive engagement practices; soliciting the assistance of supportive personnel and engaging in enriching activities, she had used in secondary school and transferred those practices to her college academic engagement. She was preemptive when it came to her academic work. She acquired clarification on all aspects of her assignments before proceeding to do the work assigned. Lara felt that going the extra mile in her academic engagement was beneficial. She believed that in order to achieve academically, she had to engage fully in whatever task she was trying to accomplish.

Regardless of how proactive participants were in their engagement practices, they still perceived hindrances to their academic engagement, thus limiting their academic achievement. Though sometimes struggling and encountering hindrances to full academic engagement, AAUW were still able to forge ahead to make sure their goal of academic achievement was realized.

Perceived Hindrances to Academic Engagement

Just as practicing proactive academic engagement allowed for participants to have some amount of control over their academic achievement, other factors may have inhibited their engagement. Some challenges of engagement for AAUW that they spoke about were microaggressions (Pierce, 1970) they experiences in class and around campus from students of other races. Microaggressions were subtle acts of racism and
sexism because of race and gender perpetrated against these women. These microaggressions came in the form of exclusion from study groups and friendship circles. Bailey explained that she sometimes felt that she was not well received by some groups when she tried to infiltrate their circle of friends inside and outside of classroom settings. AAUW felt that they could gauge the perceptions of their peers by the way the peers acted toward them. For example Bailey commented:

They do not say anything to me per se, but I get the feeling when I’m around other non-AAUW and they seem closer to one another than to me. You can tell by the way they act around you, yeah.

In addition to comments that Bailey shared about how she perceived hindrances to her academic engagement, Elena also encountered obstacles to her ability to fully practice her academic engagement in the classroom with her peers.

Elena spoke about how her classmates’ actions affected her engagement with non-AAUW. She had stopped trying to solicit any form of engagement from classmates, but instead sought opportunities for interactions and collaborations through her business club and cultural based organizations on campus. She noted:

You can tell where people are coming from just by the comments they make in class and how they talk about certain issues that are brought up in discussion. There was a presentation made in one of my classes by a White female about rape. During the presentation, all women of various races with the exception of AAUW were not shown in the slides and talked about needing protection from such a violent crime. Not once were AAUW included in an entire presentation. We were totally absent as though we did not matter in the context of rape being a crime against us. I thought, can we at least get a bullet on the slide.
The absence of any mention of AAUW in the class presentation left Elena feeling that AAUW did not matter. When she asks herself, “can we get at least get a bullet on the slide?” She is literally asking if it is too much to recognize AAUW as members of the larger campus community? After experiencing such an encounter, Elena was even more reluctant to engage with any other females in that particular setting. Because of the engagement in the classroom when the White female gave her presentation, Elena resigned herself to thinking that AAUW were not seen as a part of the student body. Elena felt invisible as a member of the class and as a member of the gender of women. Even though, she [Elena] was not represented in the class presentation, she gleaned any information that she felt pertinent to the subject matter; knowing that she would need to recall the information presented at some later date.

These participants recognized the value of academic and social engagement with other members of the campus community. Participants’ engagement with diverse groups of other undergraduate women is limited. For the most part, these women reported that races are polarized as far as interactions between African American women and women from other racial and/or ethnic backgrounds.

The AAUW felt that their engagement was not in sync with non-AAUW. Similar to Elena and Bailey, they all reported that it is very difficult to engage with other non-African American women in class. A perceived hindrance to engagement with diverse groups of students and women that were not AAUW was long held stereotypes of AAUW held by other students. Bailey described that non-African American students’ stereotype AAUW. The ways in which stereotypes were manifested through acts of dismissal and questioning were exemplified in perceptions believed to be evident in class. Perceptions of dismissal and questioning of AAUW was explained by Bailey when she commented:
They don’t really take us seriously, at least from my experience. I just feel like people expect Black women to not be as intelligent. It seems like they don’t expect us to know the answers, or expect us to be academic. They think I’m an athlete if I say I go to UCJ and are surprised when I say I’m not an athlete.

These statements illustrated how AAUW are stereotyped around campus. Bailey felt dismissed when she was doing group work in class. Consistent with one of the constructs in Collins’ (2000, 2009) Black Feminist Thought states that African American women have been stereotyped by the dominant culture. The women worked hard to do well academically, in order to dispel the myth that they were not a monolithic group and to debunk the myth that they were unintelligent.

AAUW In addition to stating their perceptions of academic engagement, participants were asked to share their perceptions about their social engagement. A description of how they perceived their social engagement to mean at UCJ is defined below.

Defining Social Engagement

Participants tended to define social engagement as engagement involving other members of the college environment. Involvement might have been in the classroom, residence hall, clubs or in the neighboring community. The idea of forming bonds, networking, collaborating, and engaging in a more relaxed manner than academic engagement would entailed, were themes that permeated AAUW perceptions of what social engagement meant to them. Perceptions described by Lucille and Jasmine were reported below and their perceptions were representative of the other AAUW perceptions in the study. For example, Lucille shared her perception of what social engagement meant. Lucille stated:
Social engagement. That could mean so many things, at least for me. Participating in activities with my friends, just joking around, laughing and going out, or having lunch with someone, I consider [these] to be social engagement activities; just some type of social interaction with another human being. The Black Recruitment Center has been great in promoting this form of engagement for AAUW. It serves too to help us with academics. The atmosphere is welcoming and supportive. It gives a respite from stress.

The Black Recruitment and Retention Center serves as a space for Lucille to engage socially with other African American women. Some activities include engaging in study jams, which she admits she loves. She too is very engaged in the Black community. Just as Storm and Lara mentioned earlier, Lucille engages socially with women from the center, and she does a lot of work with the National Council of Negro Women on campus and the Black Retention and Recruitment Center. Lucille is an academically and socially engaged student inside and outside the classroom. She admits that most of her social engagement involves other African American women. An extension of the social engagement that these women share is engagement on an academic level. One example of social engagement influencing academic achievement is through study jams, where they share academic content, which helps to increase their academic achievement in related course work.

Slightly varying from Storm, Lara and Lucille’s definitions of engagement, Jasmine believes academic and social engagement coexist, and that African American women need both to maintain balance in college. When asked to describe what social engagement meant to her, she commented on the collaborative aspect of social
engagement. Similar to other participants, Jasmine believes social engagement is “not so much teaching or learning aspect to it. It’s more bringing people together to enjoy company and presence and build bonds among people.”

This idea of social engagement involving other members of the campus community was repeatedly by other AAUW in the study. Social engagement involved collaborating with peers. Social engagement was seen as a way of forming bonds with women of the same and different races. The next section will speak to how bonds are made through the AAUW social engagement practices with same race and gender peers as well as women of different races.

**Forming Bonds with Women as an Engagement Practice**

A substantial body of research maintains that African American undergraduate women need to form bonds with a supportive person or group to feel connected to the collegiate environment. (Atwater, 2009; Bryant-Davis, 2013; Burgess & Brown, 2000; Caldwell, 2000; Constantine & Greer, 2003; & Gasman, 2009). The AAUW spoke about forming bonds with same race peers and women of other races.

**Forming Bonds with African American Undergraduate Women**

In this study, I found that social and emotional bonds for AAUW were made with same-race and same-gender peers. It is not surprising that many of the participants are engaged in activities that are racially homogeneous, as many of them echoed similar sentiments of being excluded from racially mixed organizations and activities. For example, the women did not study with cross-racial or cross-gender groups that were non-African American. They did not join any Greek affiliated organizations that were not race specific; neither did they go to parties that were hosted by students other than those who were African American. As far as social engagement goes, the AAUW admitted they are basically engaged with the Black community. AAUW acknowledged to feeling more
comfortable in that setting and feeling they fit in and were more readily accepted. The feeling of comradery established among the AAUW during their participation in race specific organizations such as National Council of Negro Women was a mechanism for passing on to other AAUW how to be academically successful. Homogeneous gatherings of women were used as a means to hand down unwritten rules of how to maneuver the chilly collegiate environment and still be academically successful. As stated by several of the women in the study, having the support of other AAUW helped them to have a sense of belonging to a community of women and this feeling of belonging lessened the sting of being isolated. The emotional boost that a sense of belonging fostered, helped them to have confidence in their own ability to be academically successful.

Four of the AAUW in the study spoke extensively about being involved with the National Council of Negro Women. Like Storm, Lucille, and Lara, Jasmine is also involved with the National Council of Negro Women on campus. She [Jasmine] however, takes a larger role in the organization than the other three women. She assists with programming and planning the events of the organization and plays a major role in recruiting women to participate in the annual retreat. This retreat brings together over 50 undergraduate Black women for a weekend at an off-campus site. Jasmine commented concerning her role as a board member of the National Council of Negro Women:

I’m also engaged in putting on a lot of events for women on campus. We actually have a big annual retreat that we host coming up soon. It’s where we take a group to a beach house and spend a weekend in there, and then connect and bond. It’s really aimed at connecting upper-class women to freshmen, just to give them that big sister-type mentor

Having participated in the NCNW as a participant and now a leader, gave Jasmine insight into how helpful being engaged in this type of organization
was to her and other AAUW. The annual retreat was mentioned by the other three aforementioned AAUW. Jasmine saw her engagement with the NCNW as a catalyst for her to take a leadership role in getting AAUW together. She felt there was a need for women to learn from other women that have encountered some of the challenges they had previously faced in college. Her participation with the group had helped her when she began her college journey as a freshman. She [Jasmine] recognized the benefit of having someone that had been there walk women through some of the nuances that AAUW would inevitably encounter in their academic and social engagement practices.

The retreat was seen as a means of getting AAUW to bond with other AAUW. A major focus of the retreat was aimed at getting freshmen familiar with upper classmen. The AAUW saw this engagement practice as a way of providing a support network for women new to the university environment. The women spoke of this engagement activity as one that was well received and had positive results for all involved. It is interesting to note that the women who attended the retreat were AAUW. Participants noted that bonding among a homogenous group of women of the same racial group was a goal of the retreat. Although much congeniality took place among women of the same racial group, during this type of engagement forum, bonding with women of other races was not a common occurrence.

**Forming Bonds with Women of Other Races**

As Kuh et al. (2005) maintain in Engagement theory, all students benefit from enriching and educational experiences, such as interacting with students of different religious or political backgrounds, talking with students of different races, and being in an institutional climate that encourages students from various backgrounds, etc. The AAUW in the study found it difficult to foster enriching
educational engagement with women unlike themselves. Several participants commented on how difficult it has been for them to form bonds with other women. An example of this negative experience is exemplified by Lucille’s comment that

People have tried to give me dab; some odd fist pump and handshake.

I’m a hugger, I love hugs, but I know people have come up to me and like try to remove my femininity as a Black woman in comparison to women of other races; like I am less of a woman because of my Blackness.

Lucille believes that as a Black woman, she is very stereotyped. She comments that men and women of other races try to remove her femininity as a woman and she finds it difficult to interact with her non-Black peers. Ways in which peers of other races have tried to obliterate her femininity is by, as Lucille termed it, giving her “dab” rather than offering her a hug.

In some way, Lucille felt that being given “dab” was a way of diminishing her femininity. Mostly males give each other “dab”. This act by others signified to her that she was seen as less feminine than women of other races.

Lucille had not witnessed any other women being given dab like she had been. She commented that it was difficult to form bonds with women of other races because they do not understand the struggle of AAUW. Other women appear to be more desirable as suitable dating partners more so than AAUW. The fact that there are so few African American men on campus and they prefer dating interracially, puts angst between AAUW women and women of other races; making it difficult for the women to engage with one another. AAUW believed that they were seen as less feminine than non-AAUW on campus. The defeminization felt by the AAUW in this study placed a bright light on one of
the most painful aspects they reported regarding their engagement. The negative self-talk and diminished self-esteem that resulted from these experiences, directly affected their engagement. Several participants spoke about their desire to withdraw from interaction with their non-AAUW peers as they searched for safety and comfort that would allow them to re-energize. AAUW also talked about how they were or were not able to form bonds with women of other races. AAUW felt that they struggled more to interact with women different from themselves. Storm said it best, citing "I think it is a struggle more so for AAUW on campus." The AAUW felt that their marker of darker skin color made forming bonds with other women challenging. Participants believed that AAUW are not recognized for their hard work. In order to compensate for this lack of recognition, AAUW have to work harder. AAUW admitted that it was difficult to form bonds with other women that they don't engage with at all. They suggested that it is a constant struggle to obtain certain privileges that women of other races are afforded. For example, Storm stated that women of other races are afforded privileges because they are of a lighter hue. She reports;

We just aren't awarded privileges because we are darker skinned. And I feel constantly, like it is a reminder that like, it is a big issue on campus. Even the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) community on campus is accepted. Then too, a lot of them are White. AAUW suffer the most on campus. It's just so unfortunate that here on campus, treatment of other women of other races was better than treatment for AAUW. This type of institutional climate does not engender AAUW and women of other races to one another.

AAUW believed that of all the subgroups on campus, they were the ones seen as less feminine, less desirable, and disadvantages. They also perceived the institutional
climate served as a barrier to women of other races being able to engage and form bonds with AAUW. The women in my study spoke about their assumptions concerning other underrepresented women of color who may have faced similar engagement obstacles because of low numbers on campus. Even though there may have been perceived commonalities of engagement obstacles because of low numbers, they (AAUW) did not form bonds with other women of color (e.g. Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, etc.) either. Participants credited their historical commonality of experiences of oppression in the academy with their embodying a unique set of engagement challenges such as loneliness, exclusion, and hostility that other women could not articulate or fully understand. Additionally, women of other races had access to the limited number of available African American men. Because the men were willing to engage with women of other races in a social manner, such as dating, whereas the practice of interracial dating was not an acceptable practice for AAUW on this campus, lessened dating options did not endear AAUW to want to bond with women from other races.

Despite challenges that the AAUW perceived to have encountered in their engagement practices, whether with same race or women of different races and African American men, all participants agreed that they must be proactive in their engagement in order to raise and sustain their high academic achievement. Their academic achievement was foremost in their mind. They were willing to set aside all negative interchanges with other women, instances of stereotypes, and challenges with lack of suitable dating partners to concentrate on their academic achievement. All participants commented that that was why they came to college and against all odds, they would succeed in college and succeed at a high academic level. The women collectively agreed that one engagement practice that they employed in order to be academically successful was to be proactive in their engagement. Despite the success that the women achieved, they
were able of the constant challenges they encountered to their full engagement inside and outside classrooms.

Summary

This section focused on how AAUW perceived their engagement with same race and gender and different race and gender peers. Forming bonds with women of same race helped to provide bonds that were instrumental for the women [AAUW] to receive support in a mentor-type way. Having a support mechanism also helped AAUW to deflect some of the defeminizing events that occurred in their lives as students. Talking to other AAUW about how they encountered situations that they had experienced to make them [AAUW] seem less feminine than women of other races, gave commonality to understanding of some of the struggles these women endured. The next section will detail how AAUW perceived to have encountered challenges in their engagement attempts to practice academic and social engagement.

In this section I discussed AAUW forming bonds with each other as well as with non-AAUW. In the next section I discuss the participants’ perceived challenges to their academic and social engagement as well as the obstacles they experienced such as isolating events in class, the impact of finances on their engagement, and how financial hardships impacted their overall engagement practices.

Perceived Challenges to Engagement

Another common reason expressed by participants as a challenge to their engagement were the low numbers of African American women on campus. A consensus of research (Allen, 1992; Constantine & Greer, 2003; Rosales & Person, 2003; Zamani, 2003) shows that the make-up of the student body has significant influence on AAUW’s college academic achievement. Low numbers of same race peers and isolating events
that occur in class and around campus have been known to have a debilitating effect on AAUW’s achievement in college.

**Low Numbers of Same Race and Gender Peers on Campus and in Class**

The UCJ student body and faculty had few African Americans. Consequently, some of these issues in the academic and social arenas that the participants spoke of were the limited number of AAUW on the campus and in the classes. Often times, AAUW would find themselves as the lone African American student in a class of 200-300, or the lone AAU in a class of such magnitude.

**Isolating Events in Class**

Academically, the participants were not able to infiltrate certain non-African American study groups or organizations. Students in class were known to turn their backs to these women, as to avoid being asked a question by them. Participants noted that when it was time to engage in choosing members for groups, other students would turn their backs to Black women, avert their eyes from their glance, and speak to each other in a foreign language as not to let them understand where the study group would be meeting. Often, AAUW would scan the class environment to see who else looked as though they were not chosen for a group, and they would gravitate toward that person. This type of overt isolation eroded their feelings of acceptance by the most capable of women; and this type of non-supportive atmosphere caused self-doubt. The women had to work so hard to continually to feel positive about themselves after repeatedly being subjected to such isolation.

Furthermore, academically successful participants sometimes felt reluctant to speak up in class. Jasmine explained that she was reluctant because of “fear of being ‘the one’ to speak for all Black women.” Jasmine saw the predicament that she sometimes found herself in, to be stressful. Moreover, she was cognizant of not letting
her emotions prevent her from doing her academic work. She often pondered when it was appropriate to speak up and when it was advantageous to keep silent. She feels that if she does speak up at times, she may be challenged by other members of the class. So, she decides to speak or not speak depending on how powerful she thinks her message will be. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Scott (2013) where she studied communication strategies for 45 graduate and undergraduate African American women in predominantly White environments and how these strategies are enacted in cross-cultural settings.

Similarly, Drew thought she should probably reach out more, but finds it very difficult to connect with others or network. She is working on this skill. She admits that the relatively low number of African American women at UCJ represents a challenge to her academic and social engagement. She would like to see more people who look like her, and would like more support. For example, Drew contends that “because it is so easy to get frustrated and so easy to get agitated and irritated in the college setting” there is need for a supportive academic and social environment that lends itself to engaging with same and different race peers.

According to Drew, her experiences of isolation created an incongruity of expectations in her academic and social engagement. She believes that her academic engagement could be better with her academic adviser. She reports that her adviser does not understand her. Drew reported feeling that her advisor ignored her as a person and as a black women, and seemed to be using some type of standard advising schema when speaking with her. An example Drew offered was that her adviser told Drew to sign up for certain courses in order to be eligible to declare her major course of study. Drew stated that if the adviser had looked at her transcript, she would have seen that she had already taken and successfully completed the courses she [adviser] was
instructing her to take. When this happened, she explained, she became frustrated and thought to herself, “Why aren’t you helping me?” Drew believed that the adviser had a template that was used for all students who came to her for advice. This template may not have suited her [Drew] needs at any given time.

This section dealt with AAUW’s perceptions of isolating and hostile events that occurred in different spaces during their academic and social engagement practices. Jasmine felt ambivalent about speaking up in classes where she was the only African American present, for fear of being the voice for all AAUW. Being a spokesperson for an entire race of students caused her to feel a degree of stress. Isolating events also proved to be a source of stress in AAUW’s lives. In addition to being seen as a spokesperson, isolating events, and not being heard by those in a helping position, AAUW encountered financial woes that impacted their engagement and academic achievement. This section highlighted the significance of events which caused AAUW feelings of isolation in their efforts to engage with members of the university community. The data clearly indicated the importance of affirmation by peers, faculty, and academic advisers as sources of support that have the tendency to enhance or diminish engagement efforts by AAUW inside and outside the classroom.

**Finances and their Influence on Engagement and Achievement**

AAUW found engagement in the classroom to influence their academic achievement. Additionally, they spoke of other issues that influenced their academic achievement and engagement. Financial concerns also resonated throughout their commentaries as an influence to their academic and social engagement practices. Ways in which finances influenced their engagement and achievement are detailed in their stories that follow.

All of the women remarked about the impact financial considerations played in their college journey. Being cognizant of their finances, or lack thereof, served as a factor
in some women's inability to have time for as much academic engagement as they would like. Moreover, finances played a major role in all of the participants' management of their social engagement.

**Financial Hardship**

As impactful as the isolation and hostility participants experienced in classes were persistent financial hardships, which had a profound impact on their schooling. A known challenge to student engagement for African American undergraduate women is financial hardship (Chambers & Poock, 2011). Elena, Jasmine, and Storm all spoke of the financial concerns being a deciding factor of their college attendance. They also described financial obstacles they have encountered while attending college. While the other five participants talked about needing to supplement the financial assistance they received from UCJ, income received from jobs seemed adequate to help them meet their needs.

Storm seemed most affected by the financial hardship she encountered while matriculating her first two years in college. The fact that she pays out-of-state tuition, which is more money than a resident student is required to pay, adds an extra financial burden to her already hefty tuition bill and housing cost. Storm remarked that her stress level has been so high at times that she became very aloof, depressed and not fully engaged in the college experience academically or socially. She noted “I didn’t come into UC [Joplin] with any outside scholarships. Um, the cost of attendance is ridiculously high. So that’s definitely affecting me in more ways than one. I guess the burden from being here.” Storm attended classes for an entire term, not knowing whether she would receive credit for her work. But fortunately it all worked out as she received some grant money from the university on the last day before classes ended for the semester. Because of
this experience, Storm is committed to being more proactive early each academic year in order to secure money to cover her college expenses.

Elena had her heart set on going to Xavier University in Southern California. When she did not get accepted, she threw up her hands and resigned herself to go to a community college instead. Money, of course, was a concern to pay for her college education. The financial assistance she receives from UC [Joplin] was a huge factor for her to submit her letter of intent to the university. Elena stated “Another big factor of coming here to UC [Joplin] was actually financial aid. They offered me the best package. You can’t really throw that away.” She presently works on two jobs and commented that she was relieved to get away from the economic strife her family experienced.

Elena lives off campus because it is cheaper than living in on campus housing. However, she finds commuting a problem. She believes that it is a different life than being on the Afro Theme Floor, where she previously lived because she is not as accessible to friends now that she no longer lives on the floor. Elena presents as a very confident and self-assured student. While Elena often spoke about being a role model for other young African American women, her school work and two jobs took up most of her time. She does not have time to be engaged in a lot of social activities. Her two jobs, one in retail and the other in the business school, keep her very busy from eight o’clock in the morning until nine o’clock in the evening. Elena had saved money to buy a car so that she would have transportation to and from work and school. Her hopes were dashed when she could not get the car. Since her plans fell through due to finances, her mother then gave her an older model car, and it stopped working. At the time of the interview, which was on a Friday, Elena did not know how she would get to work or school Monday morning.
Similarly, Jasmine decided to accept the offer of admission to UCJ for financial reasons. In the beginning of her college search, she had never heard much about the university. She was recruited and asked to come for an interview to receive a scholarship. After the interview, she was not sure she wanted to attend a university so far from home. After receiving a full-ride scholarship to UCJ, she decided to accept the university’s offer of admission. She remarked that the financial aid offer changed her decision-making process about her college choice. She noted, “It was really crazy to think that I went into the interview not knowing how much money I would receive. Once I got the scholarship that shifted everything for me.” Jasmine started thinking of the opportunity that was available to her, and she ultimately made the trip up to UCJ. She admits that her experience has been what she has made it. Although Jasmine is an outgoing person, she expressed that her engagement is inhibited because of time restraints. There are not enough hours in the day for her to work, study, go to class, and engage in other activities. She does put forth the effort to keep her grades up, and maintain a 3.0 GPA and higher as a rising senior. The extent of her engagement revolves around the work as a program committee member for NCNW and student worker at the African American Student Development Office which both take up most of her time. This year she serves as a resident assistant on campus.

All of the AAUW interviewed were committed to being actively engaged with other Black women and supported community activism. Although they were all heavily engaged either academically, socially or both, they would like to have been more engaged while attending college. However, they work to get money for their housing and basic needs while in college. The necessity of holding jobs to secure financial stability limited their time for academic and social engagement. These women mentioned that sometimes when their financial needs are not met; it weighs heavily on their minds.
The financial struggles that AAUW dealt with and their management of their finances and struggles were an important consideration when they spoke of engagement. AAUW perceived that they were in a unique financial situation; one of constraints because of lack of funds on their part and their parents ability to contribute to their financial needs. The worry about finances had the potential to derail AAUW academic and social engagement. However, the women in this study, knew how having high academic achievement and graduating from college would put them in a better financial position later in life. Furthermore, the struggles that financial hardships caused them to endure only served to motivate them to make sure, they made the most of the opportunity given to them.

Most participants would like to be more engaged than they presently are at the university. Some of these women experienced challenges to their academic and social engagement practices, by being excluded from organizations and groups that are not specific to African American women. Additionally, working many hours on several jobs limited some participants’ availability to be engaged in campus and community social activities. Likewise, being available to take advantage of all academic activities other than class attendance is limited because of work hours.

Data from the AAUW in this study indicate that economic pressures negatively impact engagement. This phenomenon of pressure cut across all of the participants and their engagement practices. Because these women were required to work to help finance their education, they were forced to forego some academic and social engagement opportunities such as tutoring, parties, going to sporting events and trips home. The nine African American undergraduate women in this study detailed how they perceived their engagement at the university. As they relayed their engagement practices, their definitions echoed some of the findings in other studies about AAUW
conducted by (Caldwell, 2009; Fires-Britt; Von Robertson, et al., 2005). However, the primary difference in this study and other studies about AAUW is that this study was qualitative, and specifically concerned with academic and social engagement, allowing the women to speak about lived the experience in their university setting. Participants described the ways in which their engagement practices differ from those of African American undergraduate men, other undergraduate women of color, and White undergraduate men and women.

African American women and men are represented in low numbers on the college campus. All of the participants stated that African American males had their own struggles, because their representation on campus was even smaller than the population of African American undergraduate women. Although men represent an even lower number of Black students on campus, the Black women see themselves as being treated with more hostility and isolation than the men. Although the participants did recognize that other undergraduate women of color (e.g. Latinas, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and specific Asian American subpopulations) are also underrepresentation on campus, they expressed that their experiences with engagement may differ from these other women.

These women admitted that some other women of color such as Latinas, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Pacific Islanders have even lower representation, and experience similar engagement hurdles that African American women experience in the academy. They expressed that other women of color still have access to cross-racial engagement opportunities, such as being invited to join organizations that are not racially exclusive, opportunities the participants felt are not afforded African American women.
Summary

While the current chapter deals with the participants’ perceptions of engagement, both inside and outside of the classroom setting, Chapter Seven provides an account of their perceptions of how engagement practices influence their academic success. Specifically, Chapter Seven addresses the second research question, followed by an analysis and connection to existing literature.
Chapter 7

How Engagement Influences Academic Achievement

Each participant in my study was able to share insights of how she personally perceived how her engagement practices played a part in her college experiences and academic achievement in college. Chapter Seven specifically addresses the second research question of the study: how do these practices shape their experiences and academic success on campus? The following five themes emerged with respect to the aforementioned research question: 1) Pre-College Preparation and Engagement, 2) Inequitable Experiences of Engagement Inside and Outside of Classroom Spaces, 3) Stereotypes of African American Undergraduate Women Influence Engagement, 4) Experiencing Instances of Hostility and Isolation, and 5) Supportive and Affirming Spaces

Pre-College Preparation and Engagement

Although this chapter focuses mainly on how engagement practices shape participants’ experiences and academic success on the college campus, I include their narratives about perceived human and institutional challenges and promoters of engagement prior to and during college. I felt it was important to ask participants about their engagement practices before entering college, since these women were alumni from various high school settings. Subthemes a) High School Engagement Practices for African American women, b) Hard work coupled with extended academic engagement pays off, c) Engaging with diverse groups before attending college, and d) Familial influences and student engagement practices will also be presented. A glimpse into what their engagement practices were and how these practices influenced their academic achievement was useful to set the context of present academic and social experiences that influence academic success While some of the participants came from low-income communities and high schools with limited resources, others came from private elite,
magnet, and specialty high schools with a wealth of resources and opportunities. Since all of the women currently attend an elite, predominantly White research university, it is interesting to see whether pre-college engagement practices differed from their engagement activities in college. The topics of pre-college inhibitors and promoters to engagement surfaced frequently in our dialogues during the interviews. The participants’ thoughts about topics of hindrances and promoters of their academic and social engagement are included in their commentaries. These women shared noteworthy insight into how their pre-college engagement practices shaped their experiences before entering postsecondary education. The influences of these practices and the connection to present academic performance are discussed. A description of their academic and social engagement experiences during their high school and college years follows.

High School Engagement Practices for African American Women

Gafford, Muhammad, and Dixson (2008) posit that at the high school level, African American women are relatively more engaged than their male peers. If prior research holds true, then an assumption would be that these participants would continue to be engaged on the college campus, and more so than their same-race male peers. Scholars have noted that African American women are more likely to enroll in college than their same-race peers, but are less likely to persist or graduate in a six-year period (Walpole, Chambers, & Goss, 2009). Since the women at UC Joplin graduate at a rate higher than those attending other colleges in the state, and at a higher level than their same-race peers, it is important to explore how these women accomplish success, and if it is shaped by their prior academic and social engagement in high school. Tinto (1987) noted that poor academic preparation for college was the source of academic problems of Black students in college, while Allen (1985) maintained that socioeconomic status of Black students while in high school might be a contributing factor to any deficiencies
students might possess. Black students typically go to high schools that have the least consistent teachers, (Capra, 2009) lack of resources, are located in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, (Wodtke, 2011) and are racially homogenous in the makeup of the student body (Kohn, 2014). Kuh et al. (2008) assert that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are academically not prepared for college can boost their achievement by becoming engaged in educationally purposeful activities.


**High School Preparation**

All participants spoke about their pre-college preparation, the socio-economic status of their neighborhoods and high school student body, and qualifications of the teaching staff at their respective schools. Bailey, Drew, Elena, Melissa, and Lucille highlighted this theme during their interviews. Similarly, they were highly engaged in educationally purposeful activities and had high academic achievement. All of them took some Advanced Placement classes and had above a 3.0 GPA in high school for all their courses combined. However, on more than one occasion during the interviews, Melissa, Lara, and Lucille voiced that, regardless of the reputation their schools had for being considered prestigious and housing the most elite scholars in the area, they encountered perceived academic problems in certain content areas (e.g. science, mathematics, etc.) at UCJ.

Just as Schwartz and Washington (2007) examined the preparation and college readiness of 213 freshmen AAUW at an HBCU in the Southeastern region of the United
States, the women in this study spoke about how their pre-college readiness shapes their engagement at UCJ. Academic practices and performance in high school are strong predictors of how successful students will be in college regardless of race (Amando, 1991; Schwartz & Washington, 2007). Conversely a lack of academic preparation also can negatively affect AAUW academic achievement in college.

All of the participants spoke about their high school academic preparation or lack thereof. For example, they described discontent with high school preparation and how it influenced academic engagement and achievement in specific content areas. Melissa stated that her school in no way prepared her for the chemistry class she took in college. She explained,

It’s my second time taking it. Last semester the problem was partially the teacher’s fault. In no way possible did my high school prepare me for what I was experiencing. The last time I was exposed to such material was in 10th grade. The information that I was given wasn’t adequate either. That became a struggle. Here, taking it for the second time, it’s still a struggle. Trying to get a hold of it early and reaching out to get resources and that whole type of academic engagement is what I am trying to do.

Melissa believes that had she been more prepared for chemistry, she would have been able to master the material better. Believing that she was not prepared for the academic experience she encountered in the sciences at UCJ left her with feelings of inadequacy.

Lucille echoed Melissa’s sentiment that her high school preparation in chemistry was lacking:

I had a substitute teacher in the middle of my senior year for chemistry class. This experience caused me to be deprived of academic challenge
and skills in this science class because lack of knowledge on the part of
the instructor in the content area.

Just as Lucille reported a perceived lack of academic preparation in high school,
Melissa spoke of academic and psychological concerns that entered her emotional
generation; the constant impending closure of the charter school she attended. It was
menacing to her academic engagement to spend energy concentrating on where she
would attend high school if the present school closed.

**Hard Work Coupled with Extended Academic Engagement Pays Off**

On a similar note with respect to high school preparation, some of the participants
reported that they were the brightest of the brightest in their respective high schools, while others
admitted that they were among the very hardest workers in high school. Drew comments, "at my
high school I wasn't necessarily the brightest student. I was a hard worker and I tried really hard,
but I would still get A’s and B’s. I took classes at community college and advanced placement
courses too.” Just like Drew, Melissa did not settle for hard work alone, but sought resources for
herself beyond the high school she attended:

> It was really an environment that kind of nurtured the idea of adaptability
and going out and getting resources, because the school itself didn’t
have the financial backing to get us the education that was proper
enough for us to make it to places like UC Joplin. I took a lot of being
engaged in other things.

While some participants hailed from underserved neighborhoods and schools,
they believed that the lack of resources made them strive to be creative in their
endeavors to gain skills necessary to stifle the long held myth that African American
women are not as prepared or intelligent as other women in the academy. Like some of
the participants, Drew and Melissa came from neighborhoods where the high schools
lacked resources. Their local high schools did not have all of the tools and advanced
courses that other wealthier schools had, yet they sought out opportunities to have the
advantage of higher level academic challenge by attending charter schools and taking
advanced level courses at the local community college. These women found that
engaging in various spaces with people other than the students in their high schools
exposed them to diverse groups of students, whereas they may not have had these
opportunities if they had not broadened their horizons of engagement. In the next section
provides information about how AAUW engaged with diverse groups, familial influences
on AAUW’s engagement, and inequitable experiences of engagement in and outside of
classroom spaces. In this section I discussed AAUW pre-college preparation and
engagement.

Engaging with Diverse Groups before Attending College

Researchers report African American females have limited interaction
with diverse groups of non-African American women in high school (Von
Robertson et al., 2005). However, African American females who come from
multiracial high school settings do not experience as much culture shock as
women coming from predominantly Black communities. The authors report that
Black females who come from heterogeneous integrated high schools perform
best at predominantly White colleges, and are more assertive at predominantly
White institutions, as opposed to HBCUs. Bailey and Jasmine came from very
heterogeneous high school settings. With respect to engagement with diverse
groups, Bailey commented:

A challenge from being engaged socially is, I think the sometimes the
Black community has a tendency to segregate themselves. I know I’m a
part of it too. You can find yourself going three years and realize you
have only attended events in the Black community and only have AAUW as friends. In high school, it was definitely different. My high school wasn’t as segregated as I have found in college.

Like Bailey, Jasmine found that women of diverse groups do not engage with one another in college as much as she found the case to be in her previous high school involvement:

For me, when I came in, I had always had a wide variety of friends of all nationalities. So when I came here, I continued to venture out and meet all these people. It wasn’t new to me. I think it’s important to have a wide variety of friends. But being at college though, I’ve been in some situations where I may not feel as comfortable; just the vibes that I get. Some of my friends I have from outside the Black community stem from my classroom relationships. First we study and then that study turns into so let’s hang out. It’s a bridge to me meeting different people rather than me just popping up, like “I’m here.”

This type of cross-racial engagement with other women proved to be commonplace for Jasmine. Similarly, Bailey interacted with women of other races in academic and social contexts before college. These academic engagement practices helped them achieve academically. Likewise, both would rather not be isolated in their engagement if it was their choice.

**Familial Influences and Student Engagement Practices**

Fleming (1984) asserts that parents of African Americans may not have the necessary knowledge and tools to assist the students with preparation for college and entrance exams, although they wish for their children to do well.

While some of the participants’ mothers were not college educated, they had the
skills to prepare and support their daughters not only for academic engagement, but also future social engagement in college.

Drew, Lucille, and Melissa spoke about going to schools that did not have the necessary technology or personnel to prepare them for the hard sciences of Chemistry and Physics and advanced courses that they would encounter, once entering college. Family members particularly mothers, often stood in the gap to garner resources for their daughters. Most participants spoke about how their mothers championed their need for a quality education, opportunities and resources. Drew, Elena, and Lara spoke about how their mothers were adamant about them getting an education. For example, Drew described how her mother monitored her education in an underserved neighborhood, stating, “. . . she sent me to the most exclusive private schools and community college while in high school in order to afford me the opportunity to get the necessary prerequisites for college.”

Drew’s comment is aligned with research (Atwater, 2009; Valery, O’Connor, & Jennings, 1997), which found that family members are instrumental in providing encouragement, reassurance, active listening, and emotional support connected to problems in college. Scholars report that mothers provide considerable support to female college students (Valery, O’Connor, & Jennings, 1997). Elena and Lara also supported these sentiments reflecting on the ways in which their mothers engaged in their academic lives. Mothers helped to shore up their daughters on a regular basis when they experienced less than desirable academic and social engagement. Lara explained that when she encountered difficulties in high school activities and practices, her mother provided emotional
support and acted as a sounding board for her to vent frustrations about these situations.

Like many of the other AAUW in this study, Lara's perceived her experiences with engagement as fraught with conflict. She spoke about feeling like she did not belong, describing low self-esteem engendered by teachers, and feeling like her voice was not heard. Lara spoke in a commanding and confident voice when she reflected upon her engagement experiences in high school. She describe how as an African American female high school student, she struggled in to gain access to activities:

I had a hard time in high school. I did not feel like I belonged. I had to struggle to be a part of clubs and activities. In high school because no one felt that I could do the job, right. I had teachers who tried to make it seem like I was not a great writer when I was. I felt constricted there; I was constantly shot down and did not feel like people wanted to hear my voice. I felt like my voice didn’t matter. I received all of my encouragement to keep going from my mother. So, I did what I had to do to get out.

Lara wanted to go to college far away from her hometown and previous school surroundings. Her mother, who Lara sees as her confidant and champion for her success, told her that her engagement options and experience would be different in college. As Lara entered UCJ, she found her mother’s prediction to be true. She reported enjoying her engagement activities much more positively in college than high school.

Inequitable Experiences of Engagement inside and Outside of the Classroom Spaces

In addition to the high school engagement practices of AAUW, researchers have identified inequitable experiences of engagement both inside and outside of the
classroom in postsecondary settings (Allen, 1992; Benton, 2001; Cabrera et al., 1999; Caldwell; 2000, Fleming, 1984; Jackson, 1998). For several decades, African American women have not only been present and successful in secondary education settings, but their presence and academic achievement in U.S. postsecondary institutions have become more prevalent. National statistics reveal differences in enrollment increases between undergraduate Black men (61%) and women (71%) in today’s colleges and universities. (PRC, 2014) With this increase in enrollment for AAUW also came instances of inequitable access to the similar academic and social activities as their male and non-Black female counterparts.

Because African American undergraduate women are matriculating more into spaces that were not historically designed for them, they encounter instances of exclusion in their social and academic engagement in postsecondary education. Just as Fleming (1984) suggested, college was a space designed for men, and the patriarchal structure still exists. This has caused AAUW to have inequitable opportunities for engagement that mirrored their male peers. Given the historical context of exclusion from postsecondary education that AAUW have experienced, recent statistics indicate that AAUW are still enrolling, matriculating, and graduating in increasing numbers at the University of California at Joplin. African American undergraduate women at the UC Joplin are progressing to degree attainment, but at what cost? This sentiment is expressed by Melissa, commenting
Sometimes I find myself questioning, if I’m doing this right? I believe professors gear their classes to weed out certain students, for instance Blacks from certain majors like math and science. They [professors] make the classes harder than they have to be or what they expect you to be able to do, because a lot of Blacks come from schools that didn’t necessarily have all the resources necessary to prepare us for those courses anyway.

Melissa’s views are consistent with findings by (Capra, 2009) that asserts that schools in underserved neighborhoods reduce courses like science and advanced courses to “short vignettes that lack both content and critical thinking” (p.77).

**Academic Engagement**

The participants spoke about their strategies for practicing engagement in the academic arena and how the skills for academic engagement were different for AAUW. AAUW spoke about their engagement in and out of classroom spaces. A discussion of how their engagement was manifested in class, campus and community is detailed.

The women in this study spoke to how they have engaged academically in college and how they are still assessing how much and what type of engagement works best for them. They also reported on the extent to which it is working with peers, tutors, classmates, or faculty. Participants described how being engaged academically and socially inside and outside of class influenced their academic achievement, viewing the classroom as a very competitive space. Storm attested to this:

Yeah, you get so overwhelmed really quickly. I think that’s the number one challenge. Learning how to be content and not be engaged in everything, just learning that it’s okay, to, you know, have a light load. I think that is one of the biggest challenges that I’ve faced, and yeah, just
with time management. You get so bombarded. This college has such a competitive environment. Every student is trying to get ahead of another student.

Storm spoke frequently about the pressure she feels while in college. Her sources of stress have come from having few friends, unfamiliarity with the Joplin community, challenging academics and financial woes. On a similar note Bailey commented:

When I am working in an academic group and I am often the only African American, students don’t assume I have given the right answer to a question. Group members will listen to another member of the group that is not Black and will accept their answer to a problem when it was the same answer I had given previously; there is never any acknowledgment that I had just said that answer.

Bailey later expanded on this point, providing an example from class:

In my Sociology class, this is one of my favorite classes even though it is taught from a Eurocentric point of view; recently I was appalled at one of my professor’s comments in class that recognized an African American woman when she raised her hand during class discussion. He boldly stated, Okay, now let’s get the minority perspective.

She gasps that someone in an official capacity would make such a statement. Her understanding of the oppressive nature of her surroundings was truly realized at that moment. Bailey’s comments indicate that the professor made the assumption that this Black woman spoke for all of the Black women in the room, and for all Black students in the class. Looking around the class, and visibly judging students’ reaction to his comment, Bailey, felt that no one really thought anything of his comment. She reported
that in order to counteract such widespread ignorance, “I try even harder to dispel the myth that African American women all are the same. In that moment I felt that African American women were being seen as a monolithic group.” Nonetheless, this incident made her even more determined that she would not succumb to her feelings of hurt and anger. Bailey would instead make sure that she would succeed in that class, which she liked before this incident occurred.

Jackson (1998) maintains that African American undergraduate women: spend much of their energy fighting race-based stereotypes and demanding to be identified, recognized, and respected for both their race and their gender and proving to White students, faculty and administrators that they are academically qualified to be on campus. (pp. 9-10).

Like all of the other women who participated in the study, Erykah believes that she understands the influence of how her academic engagement impacts her academic achievement. She stated:

I think my academic engagement has a direct effect on my academic achievement and there are a lot of classes I’ve taken that I have not been engaged in and I’m just getting passing grades. These are really hard classes. If I engaged more, my grades would be higher.

The women in this study all held similar thoughts about the influence of their engagement practices on their academic achievement; yet there are nuances in each woman’s engagement practices that differ from the other participants. This sentiment was echoed by King (1980) in her discussion about the concept of sameness for both Black women and men.

Decades ago, King (1980) investigated the phenomenon about African American women and men being regarded as a monolithic group without regard for differences in
age, class, race, religion, or sexual orientation. The participants in this study revealed that they use some of the same, and yet differing academic strategies to foster their academic achievement. Furthermore their social engagement practices are similar, but varying by slight nuances.

**Social Engagement**

Participants spoke of burn out, sometimes feeling a tug of war between academic and social engagement. Erykah provided an extended account of her burnout and how she uses engagement practices to circumvent what could be a deterrent to her academic achievement:

Sometimes I know my studies are priority, so I usually put that first, but I know I recently was just so burnt out from school that I just left and took a dance class. I was like, you know what? I just need to go take this class and come back to this later because I don’t feel like doing it and it’s going to stress me out. If I get the stress out and come back, I could do it. The school is very competitive so there is a lot of stress that goes into that. I’ll use my social group to relieve stress. If it’s too much, too heavy, then I’ll know that I have people, I have stuff to do that I can step outside of that so I don’t crash and burn. It helps my mental stability to be able to step away from my academics and have a level of success. At this school, how you have to prepare for intellectually is very strenuous. You have to have strategies and those are hard to pick up sometimes.

The participants had social engagements exclusive of African American male participation. Within the Black community, there exists separatism among the sexes. The women spoke about how Black female and male athletes, and Black students who are Greek affiliates of both sexes, excluded themselves from engaging in any Black activities
that are not Greek or athletically focused. Some participants felt that the time restraints on Greek-affiliated women and athletes kept them from engaging in any other African American activities. African American males were mostly enrolled as athletes, who tended to mostly date women who were not African American. The participants reported that there were so few Black men enrolled at the university, that if one Black male had dated another African American woman on campus, he was off-limits to any other Black woman on campus. As Bailey put it, "... there would be too much drama." The women also expressed that they did not date any African American men on campus, explaining that all of their boyfriends were at other colleges or from the community outside the college.

Various living spaces dictated how involved the participants would be inside and outside of campus. Finances sometimes dictated whether participants remained on or off campus. Living off campus did not enhance participants' social engagement in activities, but rather limited their engagement for various reasons. Erykah believed that she would participate in social events if she were already on campus and lived in the residence hall. After moving back home, she stated:

I don’t really like to stay on campus too late because I take the bus by myself. I don’t stay as long so I’m not engaged in more community spontaneous things like just checking up on people and hanging out.

In Collin’s Black Feminist Thought (2000, 2009) the construct of Black women having similar but different experiences in regard to the aforementioned attributes is indicative of how the construct manifests in AAUW everyday lives of their academic and social engagement. The participants in this study encountered social engagement practices that left much to be desired. The participants agreed that their raced and gendered designations needed to be recognized as creating conditions that required
unique maneuvering for them. These women believed that they have experienced race and gender oppression at UC Joplin; and because of this, they carry a burden of being Black person first, a woman second, and a student third. The constant thought of being seen as less than other women in society created feelings of inadequacy and being separate and unequal members of the campus environment.

AAUW may not always engage in what is considered mainstream engagement practices such as: 1) enriching educational experiences that are characterized as interacting with students from difference races and backgrounds, and 2) being in an institutional climate that encourages students from various backgrounds (Kuh et al., 2005). The alternative ways that African American undergraduate women perceived their engagement practices to play out were by involving themselves in nontraditional ways (Caldwell, 2000). These nontraditional ways of engagement included engaging in activities outside of classrooms.

Community Engagement

Some of the women participated in community civic programs. At the time of the interviews, there were marches against mass incarceration and police brutality in a neighboring city of Bratworst. Other forms of engagement were more loosely formed get-togethers For example, Melissa mentioned “women sometimes got together and went to the Farmer’s Market on Sundays.” Additionally, Erykah spoke of get-togethers with her friends, noting “we just hang out.”

Drew practices her community engagement by volunteering at a neighboring high school to assist high school students. She is conflicted at times about participating in extra-curricular engagement because she fears her time could be spent on her college studies. She states
I find myself not wanting to get engaged in things just because I put school at the forefront. It’s finding that balance, like do I sacrifice my GPA or do I go out and volunteer at this high school? I know they need me. It’s been hard. That’s still kind of a struggle. I just left a meeting right now. I help mentor the high school students and talk to them about college. I steadily try to do outreach and get engaged in different things. That’s what so beautiful about the Black community or the Black women on campus. We get it, we know how it is, the importance of engagement. That’s just how it is.

Participants believed that engaging with other Black students; particularly women in any type of forum who were on the same track of academic success helped to undergird AAUW in their quest to continue in college. Moreover giving back to the community in some fashion was a theme that participants spoke about during the interviews.

**Campus-Wide Engagement**

Just as AAUW engaged in the community surrounding the university or the university community on campus, they also spoke about campus-wide engagement opportunities that held a significant meaning for them. Some of these campus wide assemblies were in the form of Black Wednesdays, The Black Student Union, The Hammond Black Business Association (HUBBA) and Impact Thursdays.

Campus-wide engagement for African-American women included Black Wednesdays. Black Wednesday has been a tradition at UCJ for 25 years. Black undergraduate and graduate students gather together every week to engage socially. Undergraduates may use this opportunity to network with graduates of the university. This two-hour event from 12:00-2:00 p.m. may include cultural poetry readings and step
shows. These participants and onlookers who would hang around the periphery of the activity space meet every Wednesday at noon in the middle of campus. Sometimes there would be food, Greek sponsored activities, drives, or just impromptu get-togethers. Participants commented that it was such a great feeling to see other Black women, because they could literally go a week without seeing one another Black face if they did not live on the Afro Theme Floor or have any other Black women in their classes.

In an effort to surround herself with other AAUW, Melissa decided to engage in the Black Student Union (BSU). She served as the financial chair of the organization. At the time of the interview, the organization was heavily involved in raising funds. Melissa saw her engagement in this campus organization as a way to stay connected to other AAUW; particularly freshmen AAUW. She reports:

Just being able to talk to them [freshmen AAUW] about their academics and classes. Not to take certain classes together. Not all of the AAUW live on the Afro floor. Socially, I encourage them to go to events that I’ve gone to in the past. I see being a part of BSU puts me in contact with AAUW that I may not be able to find on campus otherwise.

Like Melissa, Elena engaged in campus wide activities through her business club (HUBBA). Elena gives an account of how she and other members of HUBBA reach out to AAUW and capture even a bigger audience. She reports:

If you’re not on the Afro Floor you’re hard to reach. With HUBBA, its more business specific, where we actually went to the business classes and see the Black faces and say hey, we have this club and it’s for you. That’s how we capture a bit of a bigger audience. HUBBA gives out free food to everything we sponsor. I’ve enjoyed HUBBA more than I did BSU. It’s just what clicks with you as an [AAUW].
Elena goes on to report about Impact Thursdays. Impact Thursdays were designed as an engagement activity to get AAUW to get together every other Thursday at a café. She stated:

We all agreed to meet up at a café so we could see each other. Just to check in and say, “How are you doing?” Having those, say for instance it has been an entire week and I haven’t seen a Black face, I've gone an entire week and haven't seen anybody. It's good to have that security or just the fact that you know if you want to see some Black people, you can go and you can mingle, talk, joke around or can do whatever

AAUW in this study were not just concerned about their own engagement. They felt it was important to help the women that were in the younger matriculation levels than they were. They purposefully found ways to reach women that may not live on the Afro floor, where many of the AAUW lived, and engage them academically and socially to increase their academic achievement.

This section reported how AAUW practiced their engagement in and outside of classroom spaces. The next section reports how AAUW are stereotyped as Black women, and how AAUW engage with faculty and peers. The chapter ends with discussion of how AAUW present engagement related to their future plans after graduation.

**Stereotypes of African American Undergraduate Women Influence Engagement**

As asserted by researchers, (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 2005; Pace, 1980, 1985) all participants agreed that engagement involved effort. Their experiences with engagement as undergraduate women of color mirrored the findings of Chambers and Poock (2011) in their quantitative study that explored how engagement is manifested inside and outside the classroom for 6, 625 African American undergraduate women. Throughout
conversations with the participants, they echoed the fact that non-African Americans could not believe that they were admitted to the university on merit and not on athletic ability.

The next section will speak about stereotypes perpetrated on AAUW by non-African American students, faculty and staff and how AAUW have experienced hostility and isolation in the college setting. Furthermore, a description of how having supportive and affirming spaces assists AAUW in having a respite from hostility and isolation that they regularly encountered.

**Stereotypes**

All participants described a lack of acceptance for their presence at UC Joplin. They were viewed as unique situations and the one in a million; an exception rather than the norm for African American undergraduate women. Many of the participants said that being African American women played a major role in their desire to succeed at the university. They said that because others believed they could not be successful, it caused them to engage more to work even harder to prove others wrong. They commented that they are often made to feel unwelcome in the classroom by fellow classmates. The exception is only when participants were in an African American Studies class where a significant number of students were African American and the class was being taught by an African American professor. Melissa stated:

*I think a lot of the challenges in class that I’ve ever experienced are internal. Just in the sense of you walk into a classroom and no matter how many students there are, you’re always outnumbered. It’s even an internal struggle to even be considered intelligent. Definitely as I enter more spaces and just open my mouth more often, and receiving*
reassurance from professors has really helped build my confidence in those challenges.

Melissa began to take advantage of resources she was introduced to by other staff and Black women. As a connection to other AAUW, she took advantage of the tutoring offered through the Student Learning Center.

**Experiencing Instances of Hostility and Isolation**

The AAUW in the study spoke constantly about the need to see other faces that looked like them. They reflected on the competitiveness of the classroom environment. The participants noted that their classmates do not share notes with African American women, or if they happen to be a few minutes late for class, they will not share any information about where the class is in the presentation of material. The African American women discussed being last to be chosen for any group work, unless groups are arranged by the professor, and tend to be called upon only when the conversation is about minorities, making them hyper-visible in class (Kraft, 1991). Several of the participants spoke of isolating and debilitating occurrences they had encountered in and outside of the classroom while matriculating through the university. These occurrences came in the forms of insults, being called names, and being excluded from groups. The next subtheme talks about some of the experiences of engagement that AAUW encountered and how these negative occurrences have left them with feelings of oppression, isolation, and hurtfulness.

Erykah relayed how she felt as an AAUW in general and described how the act of walking into a classroom conjured up feelings of stereotype when she described:

There’s certain stereotypes that are placed on me as a Black woman as soon as I step into the classroom, or the thought that I may not have adequate knowledge, or “she’s just here because she’s Black,” even
though race based admissions are no longer in existence. I feel like I’m automatically not looked at as smart as other people. On top of that, it’s like, she may be ghetto or she might have a bad attitude. All of these pile up on me and I feel like it doesn’t happen to women of other races.

Similarily, Bailey spoke about stereotypes of AAUW being alive and well at the university. She felt that race definitely impacted her engagement on campus. She comments that she is often times dismissed in conversations with other non-AAUW and felt that it was because she is a Black woman. She continues in the conversation and believes she knows how stereotypes of AAUW limits their dating on the campus. Bailey shares what she has heard Black men say:

I won’t date Black women, which is something that bothers me. Just stereotypes like, they’re loud, they’re dramatic, and they’re angry. Just typical stereotypes like that.

Erykah’s and Bailey’s opinions were similar to the rest of the AAUW that participated in the study. They [participants] were aware of how peers, professors and staff viewed AAUW through a stereotypical lens. The unfortunate thing is, they [majority peers, professors and staff] never took the chance to get to know these women on a personal level. The reason they did not know them was because they did not allow themselves to engage with the women on an academic or social level.

Stereotypes of AAUW were not a figment of the participants’ imaginations. AAUW gave examples of how they were women that had insults perpetrated on them without cause. During our dialogue in the interview, they could not recall such insults being hurled at women of other races. Some of the instances of isolating and debilitating occurrences in and outside of classroom spaces, they encountered are shared in the next section.
Isolating and Debilitating Occurrences

Participants spoke about insults being hurled at them by non-African Americans. Some insults were less subtle than others while some verbal assaults were so debilitating that the occurrence caused one student to question whether she wanted to be engaged at UC Joplin soon after arriving on campus. Lucille gave a detailed account of a very hurtful situation in which she was the victim of a debilitating occurrence.

Lucille spoke about actually being called the “N” word by a total stranger while walking across campus after her second day of arrival on campus. This verbal assault made her feel marginalized and oppressed around campus. Those students looking on did not come to her aid. No one asked if she was okay or said anything about what had transpired. Lucille seemed visibly still upset by the incident because of her voice resonating with disbelief reporting:

There are daily micro aggressions perpetrated on AAUW daily. That's what I can definitely see. I remember on my second day here. It was terrible. I was walking to campus. I had just gotten to UC Joplin. Literally just moved in and I was coming on to the campus. A male person, called me an “N”. I don’t even know if he was a student attending the university or not. He went on to say, “You don’t even have five fingers, you primate.” “I'm assuming this person was not fully there, because Joplin has a very large transitional living population, but it was still hurtful. I felt very uncomfortable and unsafe in the campus environment. People were just sitting down and looking and I was just like, “What?”

Lucille felt that no one said or did anything because the insult was not directed at them. Consequently those students looking on felt they did not need to do anything about the occurrence they just witnessed. Some students may not have known what to do or
how to act when an insult of such magnitude occurred. Moreover, they did not appear empathetic towards Lucille and went on about their day and not a single person engaged her in conversation to assess whether she was emotionally okay or felt safe in the environment.

Most occurrences of hostility are not as overt; but, participants do believe that, although less blatant assaults may be hurled at them. Specifically as in Lucille’s instance, AAUW felt they were often the receivers of racist acts in and out of classroom spaces. They are not acknowledged for any of their effort, except by other African American Professors, staff, and peers. While other acts of denigration and oppression may be less overt than the encounter Lucille experienced, nonetheless, other participants voiced their view about how they perceived the campus climate to hinder engagement and seemed to perpetuate a breeding ground for isolating and debilitating acts to be perpetrated against AAUW. Jasmine commented:

I am so shocked that the atmosphere at this school is the way it is, given its history of protest in the 60’s and the community’s liberal ideas. The scenario that we as Black women face every day is not reflected in what the public sees from the outside. The African American Theme Floor and the Black Student Recruitment and Retention Center are life savers against the barrage of hostility that we feel all day long. I don’t know what I would do if those spaces were not here.

Both Jasmine and Lucille see the benefit of having a counter-space to retreat to when the barrage of daily micro-aggressions weighs heavily on their social and physical well-being. Lucille believes that being at UC Joplin would be so much harder without the support of programs specific to African American students. She explained, “It’s good to talk to someone that gets you, and you
don’t always have to explain and beat around the bush because of what you are talking about.” These African American women commented that it takes much effort and strength to be engaged in a hostile atmosphere both inside and outside of the classroom. This hostility takes a toll on one’s self-confidence as well as emotional and physical energy. Melissa sees AAUW as not wanting to complain and walking around with a façade of contentment. These women did not appear as victims, or saddened at any time during the interviews. To hear their stories of resilience made me more proud of each one with each successive interview.

Melissa spoke of the issues and struggles African American undergraduate women faced, during our interview time, noting “Most don’t complain and walk around and don’t show what is really going on. . . . We just need to take it in, suck it up, and move on. That’s something I see within myself, peers and friends.” Melissa spoke of not wanting to put pressure on her mom at home, because she [mom] had her own struggles, particularly relating to her financial situation. AAUW recognized how beneficial engagement with other AAUW, African American faculty and staff could be.

To engage with women of the same race, whether they engaged as peer to peer, or professor to student helped to fortify the AAUW in this study and give them the self-confidence they needed to strive for high academic achievement. All participants agreed that there was a need to engage in supportive and affirming spaces with women like themselves. They believed that other AAUW understood each other’s struggles in the collegiate environment. This common understanding of the struggles that these women encountered individually and collectively made the need for supportive and affirming spaces very important to their academic achievement.
Supportive and Affirming Spaces

Research documents the need for AAUW to have supportive and affirming spaces in college (Caldwell, 2009; Rosales & Person, 2003). The participants all believe that the community of African American undergraduate women understood what it was like to be on the campus, but yet not be fully a part of it. Researchers suggest that academic and social alienation have a deleterious effect on AAUW. Fleming (1984) posits that if AAUW do not have a strong and supportive social network, they will feel alienated on college campuses. The lack of supportive and affirming spaces, therefore, may cause less interaction with faculty, and less positive academic achievement for AAUW on predominantly White campuses (Von Robertson et al., 2005). The sentiment that Erykah relayed to me, underscores this idea:

I think one of my favorite things about being in the Black community is that we understand the struggle. A lot of us in the same year will go through some of the same classes, so we'll be on our study groups and that's been really helpful in the past.” AAUW in the study admitted that it was beneficial to have other AAUW around. As Lucille reported, “It’s just good to have AAUW bodies around, reminding me that we can do this, and we’re doing it at the moment.” AAUW were dedicated to supporting one another through various forms of engagement.

Participants spoke of peer advising; telling students what classes they should take, and professors who seem genuinely supportive. When participants were around campus and encountered other AAUW, they would sit and talk about how school is going. These women in this study explained that they allowed themselves to be someone, who can lend a listening and supportive ear to another AAUW. They wanted to serve as one to whom their peer could vent
her feelings in order to let them know that they could achieve academically.

Serving as a successful role model was apparently important to upperclassmen for the younger women. The importance of being a role model for freshmen AAUW was explained by Lucille when she explained what it was like for her as a freshman at UC Joplin.

I remember when I was a first year, I looked up to upperclassmen. I was like, they’re so cool. Oh, my gosh they know my name. And I just realized a few weeks ago, I’m that person now. A lot of Black women asked me to help them out. It could be filling out an application to be an RA, help them to get into the biology scholars program, or help them out with Chemistry; since I have had it already. And it’s like, "Wow. Yeah I can help you out." I know because of the experiences of engagement that I have had, I love being that resource for other [AAUW].

All nine of the AAUW remembered what their engagement was like in their earlier college years. They [AAUW] realized the influence of having upperclassmen engage with them when they were freshmen had on their academic achievement. They wanted to give back to the younger women in the same way. Participants in general did not have formalized mentor mentee relationships with onsite staff or faculty members. Although their engagement with other AAUW was not formalized, they commented on the fact that seeing other academically successful women graduating and being happy was encouraging to them. Erykah expressed satisfaction when successful women would tell her “good job!” She stated that, “you need encouragement.” More specifically, she feels that engagement on campus would be even more challenging if she did not encounter other AAUW and Black graduate women who spoke encouraging words to her. Likewise, Lucille reports;
Walpole (2009) suggest that African American women engage with each other in clubs and organizations to lessen the sting of isolation and racism felt on predominantly White campuses. Participants’ beliefs concerning the types of engagement practices that made them feel comfortable and integrated into the campus were consistent with research (Allen, 1992; Bennett, 1998; Tinto, 1987). The AAUW in this study echoed sentiments from research by scholars that reported that AAUW need engagement with same race and gender peers (Allen, 1992; Walpole, 2009). These authors posited that because of isolation felt on PWIs by AAUW, they [AAUW] frequently engage with other AAUW and participate in clubs and organizations that were Afrocentrically centered. Engagement of this type gave AAUW a sense of kinship and made students feel more comfortable and integrated into the campus environment. The feeling of comfort was crucial to AAUW's academic success and persistence (Allen, 1992; Tinto, 1987; Walpole, 2009).

Engagement with Peers

A recurring theme during data collection was one of engaging with same-race female peers. Since five of the women had not grown up in a home with a college going culture, and were the first to embark on such a journey, they were navigating their way through the academic and social milieu that comes with college experience of embarking upon a new environment. The sentiments are consistent with researchers’ claims that AAUW needed to surround themselves with supportive peers in a new environment (Brown-Collins, 2007; Bryant-Davis, 2013; Mitchell, 2000; Moses, 1989; Robinson & Tucker, 1998; Watt, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

The need for AAUW to have people and spaces that provide support and can relate to their experiences cannot be understated. Sedlacek (1987) argued that the campus climate is an important factor in the student experience. Also, the importance of
the make-up of the student body such as diversity of students, faculty, and staff, the numbers of men versus women, and whether the institution is urban, rural or suburban, are elements that contribute to student achievement (Harper & Patton, 2003). Likewise, research by Allen (1992), Constantine & Greer, (2003), Rosales & Person (2003), and Zamani (2003) have suggested that the racial and gender composition of the institution plays a key role in African American women's college achievement and ultimate success. African American female students have long viewed the White college setting as one that can be alienating (Fleming, 1983). Cabrera and Nora (1996) cite that feelings of alienation are one of the key reasons African American females may drop out of college. AAUW spoke of their engagement with same race peers as being a common practice. One reason cited for this homogeneous engagement is that they gained support from one another in what they described as an isolating and hostile environment. Although AAUW reported that they gain support from being together and thereby reducing the isolation, they reported that they did not engage in certain segments of the Black student population as frequently as the students would have liked because of their living arrangements because many Black students, including AAUW, life off-campus

Living Arrangements Influence Engagement Practices

Participants spoke of various engagement practices and reasons for their engagement activities. Coupled with reasons for why they engaged with certain student populations, participants spoke about how living arrangements (e.g.) influenced their engagement patterns. Jasmine is a resident assistant and her population in her particular residence hall is made up of 70% athletes. Of the 30 residents, 18 are athletes, and most are African American men and women. Because of the employment position in which she serves, she is able to view on a regular basis who and how African American undergraduate athletes (both men and women) engage with the general AAUW
population on campus. She comments “within even the Black female community, there are still pockets and isolation among certain groups.” The AAUW athletes in this particular residence hall engaged primarily with other AAUW athletes to the exclusion of academic or social engagement with any other AAUW on campus. Living arrangements could possibly dictate who associates with whom. Elena and Erykah no longer lived in the residence hall and were living at home and in an apartment off campus. The distance required to travel to campus and their lack of transportation hindered their engagement with other students as much as they would like.

Elena shared that she shares an apartment with a group of AAUW and one Black male. She and these friends engage with one another as time permits. Because they all have different class and work schedules, their engagement is limited even though they share the same living quarters. Because Elena lives off campus like Erykah does, she must make the most of her campus engagement when time allows. Therefore, she explains:

I engage most through HUBBA, both academically and socially. With a demanding work schedule of two jobs, I use what organization I am already a part of to connect with Black students in general and other AAUW in particular.

Participation in clubs and organizations has long been touted as a means of engagement for AAUW. Those AAUW who participated in this study spoke about their engagement, or lack thereof, with Greek- affiliated chapters of AAUW. Participants shared mixed reviews about their engagement with members of BGLO. A synopsis of how engagement among these members of the Black community is described in the next section.
Black Greek Letter Organizations and Student Engagement

Caldwell (2000), Guiffrida (2004), Kimbrough (1998), and Pike (2003) speak to how Black Greek Letter Organizations can serve as mechanisms for social engagement for AAUW; however, none of the women in the study were members of a Black Greek Letter Organization. When asked about their engagement with AAUW that were Greek-affiliated, they spoke about how the women in sororities were often doing service for other Black women on campus as a group. For example, AAUW that were Greek affiliated were often found spearheading blood drives for Red Cross, holding drives for food banks, and toy collections for kids during the holiday season. AAUW that were Greek affiliated sometimes sponsored events during the Black Wednesday assembly; supplying food for anyone that might engage in event on that day. However, if you were not Greek-affiliated, you never interacted with those AAUW who are in sororities. Interestingly, the participants spoke in a benevolent manner concerning Greek-affiliated AAUW. They stated that possible living arrangements and time constraints involving civic engagement influenced their disengagement with other AAUW on campus.

In an exception to the benevolent feelings toward AAUW who were Greek-affiliated, Elena shared a story about her past experience of engagement with a Black sorority on campus. She explained why she chose not to continue down a path she had started. Although she is always soft spoken, this time she vehemently proclaimed:

I can’t have someone telling me what to do. I had enough of that in high school. I didn’t want to go down that road again. Dropping out of the process has caused some conflict for me. I don’t know what would have happened had I finished the process.

Elena realized that although she wanted to be a part of a group of AAUW who were academically and socially focused on doing well in college, that she had a decision
to make. She had a strong desire to connect with other AAUW, however, she felt that joining the sorority was not in her best interest. Because she had encountered previous negative experiences of engagement with friends in high school, the process of pledging reminded her of adverse experiences with being told what to do by others. She mentioned that dropping out of the pledging process caused some conflict with AAUW that are BGLO affiliated. I suppose once she engage in the process of becoming a member of the organization, she was privy to some of the information reserved for pledges and members only of the organization. When she encounters those AAUW that completed the process [those that started out with her and remained to completion of the pledging process] and became members of the sorority, she feels some discomfort.

The lack of a critical mass of AAUW, funding, and Eurocentric curriculum were also reasons that these women in the study felt made them to feel isolated. As a result of AAUW already feeling isolated some of the women segregated their engagement practices to include only other women of the Black community to the exclusion of Black sorority women. The AAUW in this study typically might live or have lived together in the residence hall on the Afro Theme floor. On a rare occasion when they engaged in activities that were cross-racial inside or outside of the classroom, they had feelings of being not totally integrated into the group. As stated earlier, the extents of much of their academic and social engagement were with other AAUW.

**Homogenous Engagement**

All of the nine participants spoke of the Afro Theme Floor, The African American Student Development Office, the Biology Scholars Program, The Black Student Union (BSU) and the Holt Undergraduate Black Business Association (HUBBA) as being very instrumental in creating a supportive and affirming climate for them to thrive. Although these locations and organizations were used often for printing materials and tutoring, and
are open to anyone that chooses to use these resources, the AAUW used these spaces as safe havens. Faculty and staff provided a place for them to hang out with friends, have a listening ear that understood their struggles, engage in academic and social support for one another, and have a respite from stress.

Participants felt that without their academic and social engagement that these spaces their academic achievement would suffer because of the pressure they were always under to succeed for themselves, their family, and community. For example, Elena summed up how she and other AAUW appreciated and exercised counter spaces on campus to engage with one another. These supportive spaces served as havens for respite from the barrage of stress that mounted as a result of their engagement with social and academic practices. Elena sees these spaces as locations for students to support one another. She said,

We hold each other accountable. I study with people that I have prerequisites with. I engage most through (HUBBA) and the National Council of Negro women (NCNW). I like to dance, but that’s it. I don’t like the other side of partying like drinking.

Similarly, the other eight women in the study did not party heavily while in school, choosing to interact with Black women of like mind who were more focused on their academics. AAUW on occasion referenced their engagement with non-AAUW. The perceived benefits of heterogeneous engagement have been suggested by authors with extensive knowledge in the field of engagement (Kuh et al., 2005). Likewise, scholars (Von Robertson et al., 2005) have studied the perceived benefits of AAUW’s engagement with heterogeneous groups. The next section describes benefits of heterogeneous engagement for AAUW while attending a PWI.
Heterogeneous Engagement

Engagement theory (Kuh et al., 2005) suggests that when students interact with students of different races, religions, and background, the interactions lead to enriching educational experiences. This benchmark is considered benchmark number four. Benchmark four also states that “the institution should create an atmosphere that encourages all students from various backgrounds.” (p. 9). AAUW felt that the institution did not provide any formal avenues for women of diverse backgrounds to engage with one another. Therefore, if any heterogeneous engagement took place among women from various backgrounds, races, and religions, AAUW would self-initiate such actions. Engaging with women of other races would be considered engagement in heterogeneous or diverse groups of scholars. As mentioned earlier, AAUW often engaged in homogeneous groups. However, Jasmine and Lucille had more heterogeneous engagement than the rest of the AAUW in the study. Jasmine described her experience of engaging in diverse group of students and how she came to involve herself with other women unlike herself; because of prior experiences of engagement in high school. Jasmine’s ways of engaging echoes findings from a study conducted by Von Robertson et al. (2005) that described how students with previous cross-racial engagement experiences do better at predominantly White schools. Jasmine commented:

I also engage in, I like to attend other events and social activities outside of the Black community. I feel like it’s important. Oh, yeah, no I actually enjoy going to other events I think it’s important to do that, because I’ve heard people say . . . or like the African American theme program floor, I lived there and I’ve heard people, they’ve gone through the floor and they move off, I say, “How was your experience? Because I lived there
and I enjoyed it [I say] “It was like, “you know, it was fine, but I felt like I was limited as far as meeting other people.

Jasmine felt that in some ways living on the Afro Theme Floor could isolate AAUW from other women of color and White women. She also emphasized that it depends on the person. Realizing that engaging with diverse groups of women was a self-initiated action on her part because the university did not provide avenues for women of diverse groups to engage with one another. Jasmine supposed:

If you don’t put yourself out there to meet other people outside of that community, yes that will be the only community you’re surrounded by. For me when I came in, I had always had a variety of friends from all different nationalities. So, when I came in, I continued to venture out and meet all these people

Jasmine positions herself in diverse spaces, even though she is the exception rather than the norm amongst the women in this study. She did so because she had had previous encounters in high school with women of diverse groups. She was able to engage in a congenial manner with other women before coming to college. Like Jasmine, Lucille engages with students, to include women, of diverse backgrounds in her job as a resident assistant in the residence hall. Although both women engage regularly with diverse groups of women, their commentaries differ in how they feel they are perceived and how they perceive their engagement with that are not AAUW.

Lucille had mixed emotions when she talked about her interactions with cross-racial students. She was honored that she was very well known on campus and students from various ethnicities came to her for advice. Lucille believed that she was seen by
others as a *mammy*-type figure. More specifically, this image was imposed upon her in the residence hall. She reported that her peers made comments to her such as, “Oh Lucille, you're like a mom, Mama Lucille.” She further elucidated:

And I know it’s very associated with my caring nature and stuff like that, but I know that they… I can see myself all the time, I’m this Black woman who takes care of all these young White and Asian college students, and they’re always asking me questions and literally expecting me to pick up after them and tell them what to do or how to do things. I can’t necessarily think of one particular experience, but it's been something that I have felt while I have been an RA.

Lucille admits that after being in college for three years, most students recognize her. She is ambivalent about how this recognition has a way of manifesting itself when she deals with students of other races. It bothered her to be stereotyped as the mother of all students. Lucille has her own issues as a woman and student, and wondered at times whom she could talk to when others are draining her of emotional energy. She believed that having an adult support person in addition to her peers is critical because she serves in an administrative capacity herself. If it were not for supportive people and spaces, like her colleagues, Black faculty, and the African American Student Development Center, which allow her to recharge and get her own voice heard, her job would have a deleterious effect on her emotional well-being and academic achievement.

The previous section discussed how AAUW practiced engagement with homogeneous and diverse groups of their peers. The next section reports how AAUW perceived and practice their engagement with majority group (White) faculty and with Black faculty.
Faculty-Student Interaction

Participants in the study spoke about their engagement with White and Black faculty at the university. Scholars like, Tinto (1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and Kuh (2005) assert that congenial faculty interaction with students is very necessary to student achievement. Astin (1993) posits that faculty-student interaction has a direct effect on students' G.P.A. Ellis (2001), while exploring the relationship of African American doctoral females and their satisfaction with faculty advisors and mentors, found that African American women doctoral students were more dissatisfied and disenfranchised than other students in their programs. Although Ellis’ study did not focus on undergraduate African American women, some of the participants in this study felt that professors and advisors who were not African American were inconsistent in their support of African American undergraduate women’s academic endeavors.

While the narratives of the AAUW in this study were not as positive as the women would like about their engagement with White faculty, their feeling of a lack of congeniality by White faculty was more of a common occurrence than was their desire of congeniality between faculty and students, particularly AAUW. The typical faculty-student interaction can be exemplified by an interchange Lara had with one of her White female professors. Lara very passionately told the story of an incident concerning her grade in Rhetoric class that she perceived to be unfair. She reported, “Professors are supposed to be there for all students. They look at us [African American undergraduate women] and already feel that we are unintelligent and can’t believe that we are here on merit.” Lara spoke of her frustration around this incident. I could see that she was working through recalling a painful encounter with her professor as she took a moment and took a deep inhaled breath before continuing to give her account of the interaction that had transpired between herself and her professor.
Participants had spoken of getting lower grades and choosing to schedule a meeting with the professor to plead their case for the grade they felt they should have received. For example, Lara commented with much physical animation—her hands and arms in the air, and her voice heightened, “I was marked down on one of my papers because the professor said I went into too much detail on the assignment. . . . You went beyond what I was expecting students to write.” Rather than being applauded for her deep thinking, Lara was penalized for doing in-depth research on the topic, as opposed to presenting a cursory report on the subject. After much debate, the grade was changed to an A for Lara.

Just as research conducted by Kim and Sax (2007) reported, the participants believed that establishing a congenial relationship with faculty members was important. Whether engaging in in class or outside of classrooms with faculty, AAUW saw faculty as integral parts of their success in college. Kim and Sax (2007) reported that student engagement in research-focused activities outside the classroom had a direct effect on academic achievement. At the time of this study, none of the participants in were engaged in research activities with faculty. Many of them did not share any congenial and ongoing engagement with White faculty, unless they themselves made the effort, and even then, some White faculty members were standoffish and elusive. If participants did not find the faculty to be open to engagement with them, they sought out other adults who they felt might be more approachable than the professors. Melissa and Drew spoke about graduate student instructors (GSIs) being more amicable, and how they appeared to care more about the students’ understanding of the material. The GSIs demonstrated their concern for AAUW by pulling the women aside and staying on topics until it was clear that the women understood the content of the material in whatever subject they were engaging in.
Melissa spoke clearly about her belief that having support from people is very important, even if they cannot help you with the subject matter. Melissa admitted that just being told that she did well in class or on tests helped to improve her academic achievement. She admitted that she engaged with GSIs more so than she did with professors. She described her limited academic engagement with one instructor, noting, “I did a lot of back and forth with my English professor on my papers, and I tried to see how I could improve my performance.” Melissa made every effort to improve her understanding of material and her grades in her classes. She was not afraid to seek out help, and held herself accountable for finding resources such as GSIs, study guides, tutors, and upper classmen who could help her achieve academically.

Participants believed that involvement with faculty in meaningful ways was a necessary form of engagement. Engaging with faculty is one construct in Kuh et al.’s, (2005) theory of engagement. Kuh et al., (2005) engagement activities included discussing grades, talking about reasons for their major, and trying to get into difficult majors in the sciences and economics. AAUW practiced this theoretical construct on a regular basis. These women hoped that these types of engaging conversations with faculty, staff, and advisers were practices that would lead to networking opportunities, not only while in college, but also, after graduation, when they entered the work force and/or applied to graduate or professional school. Erykah stated that the ways in which she engaged with faculty made her stand out. She said:

Now they [professors] know me for my engagement, they recognize how I show up academically. Inside and outside the classroom, so when we have social events, if it’s a topic of Black beauty or something, the way I show up in that space as an intellectual has gotten faculty and students to notice me in a certain way. I think that’s definitely been a benefit, is
that when I do show up in my engagement, I do so intentionally and my peers and faculty appreciate it and my engagement attracts people to me. I’m thinking about my plans for after college. My academic engagement is informing most of that right now.

Erykah was able to see the benefits of her engagement practices. She believed that the way she practices her academic and social engagement now while attending college, will be directly linked to her success in the future. Like Erykah, Storm also recognized the benefit of her engagement with faculty. Her [Storm’s] narrative follows.

Storm expressed that being engaged with faculty/staff helped her to secure her financial resources at UC Joplin. She lamented that her financial situation in college was bad. Because of the cost of attendance, which without the aid of scholarships or grants would seem insurmountable, she contemplated whether or not she had made the right decision by accepting the offer to come to the university. Storm shared a story of how her engagement on campus paid off in the form of gaining financial resources to defray the cost of tuition. She said:

So, basically, I was awarded a grant and I don’t know how, I didn’t apply for it or anything like that. It was basically that they’d seen my face so much, they knew enough about me that I was a good student and to know that I was really in need, and someone, it was kind of like a who-you-know kind of thing. And so it worked in my benefit this year. I’m almost halfway through and I don’t want to have to not finish school for financial reasons. Yeah, I’m trying to stay engaged with the staff that did help me out this year.
Storm’s engagement with faculty had a positive result for her financial circumstances. Because she had made herself known to them by way of her noticeable engagement on campus, faculty knew her and they were willing to be proactive to search for various types of funding for which she might be eligible for. Storm realized that funding sources unknown to her, were sought after by faculty and/or staff on her behalf to support her college expenses.

AAUW commented on the benefits they perceived to have gained as a result of their engagement with faculty and staff. Participants commented that they were the recipients of Black faculty and staff’s time, encouragement, and advise because of their [AAUW] engagement with them [Black faculty and staff]. The AAUW in this study felt that the manner in which Black faculty and staff engaged with them was both consistent and congenial. The next section describes how AAUW experienced positive engagement with faculty and staff that were Black and also in the minority at the institution.

Black Faculty-Student Interactions

While the inconsistency of faculty-student engagement was a reality for many participants, they believed there was a difference in their engagement with the limited number of Black Faculty at the university. Lucille believes that she has good experiences with Black faculty and staff. Lucille shared a story about her positive experience with a Black female professor to whom she goes for advice:

Well I am still actually working on building my connections with faculty. It is very much difficult for me. I know one thing is that because I live in the residence hall I get to connect with someone named Dr. Jones. She is an Associate professor, I want to say. Oh yeah. I think she is just super fine. She was describing her journey at this conference I was at a few weeks
ago. I’m like “Wow” Just where she was coming from. A Black woman in the sciences and pursuing statistics; I’m like, she’s so wonderful. And that just motivates me to make sure I build that relationship especially knowing that graduate school is in my future at some point. My internship over the summer came from word of mouth from friends, and stuff like that. I just get to build a lot of social capital being who I am.

Lucille saw Dr. Jones as a role model. Since there are few African American women in the sciences field, she [Dr. Jones] appeared to be an anomaly and a very unique one at that. She was both a Black woman in the sciences and also competent in the mathematics area of statistics. Lucille being in a science field herself, felt that engaging with such a professor could have long range implications for her own collegiate journey for she too wanted to further her academic achievement by entering graduate school after graduating with her bachelor's degree.

All participants were able to speak about positive engagement experiences they had with Black faculty just as Lucille spoke about her engagement with Dr. Jones. Typically, these women reported that their interactions with Black faculty were more congenial than interactions with White faculty. Black faculty readily extended themselves in various ways to render services such as advising, and serving as informal mentors to AAUW. Because there were so few Black women faculty, participants perceived that they [Black women faculty] in particular, were over worked and shouldered much more responsibility than women faculty of majority groups. This finding is consistent with findings by Patitu and Hinton (2003). The authors reported that research is also lacking on Black women faculty as well. The limited amount of research however reported that AAUW’s success is intricately connected to their engagement with African American
faculty on PWIs (Fleming, 1984). These faculties [Black women] understand what engagement is like for AAUW because they experience some of the same instances of isolation and hostility that these students encounter in the academy (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). These authors recommend that support systems should be provided on PWIs for both AAUW and African American women faculty.

This section detailed how AAUW perceived their interaction with majority and Black faculty, in and outside of class. AAUW perceived their engagement with Black faculty to be more consistent and congenial than they did their engagement with White faculty. Black women faculty were able to empathize with AAUW and their engagement practices because they had familiarity with the lived experiences of these women [AAUW] because of their own experiences on an elite PWI. The next section reports how AAUW perceived the influence of their present engagement practices had on their post-graduation planning.

**Engagement and Post-Graduation Planning**

Participants spoke of their plans after graduation. When these women spoke about their career trajectories, they mentioned how present engagement practices and activities were related to future plans after graduation. All of the participants had ideas about their post-graduation plans. Some of the participants had more specific ideas about their future plans. They spoke about where they wanted to obtain jobs and what population they wanted to serve. The participants saw their major fields of study and their engagement with faculty to be connected to their post-graduation plans. The plans of Erykah, Melissa, and Storm will be highlighted as examples of some of the post-graduation plans the AAUW felt were interrelated with their engagement with faculty had afforded.
Just as Erykah stated in her comments, about knowing her engagement with faculty was related to her future career plans, other participants saw the benefits of faculty-student interaction. The mere fact that participants could be recognized for their academic capital was deemed important. They mentioned feelings of self-doubts permeating and often eroding their self-confidence throughout their journey in college, and the toll and strain it took on their academic, emotional, and physical engagement. However, doing what was needed to further their academic achievement came before any consideration of their own emotional needs. Some of the participants’ plans included work in their home or underserved communities.

Melissa plans to obtain a job in computer science, and use her earnings to create scholarships for African American undergraduate women to be able to afford to live on the Afro Theme Floor. The engagement that she experienced while living on the theme floor helped her socially and academically. While living there, she was able to capitalize on the advice, camaraderie, tutoring, and social and academic support she received from peers, faculty, and staff. She desperately wants to give back to make the transition to college easier for other AAUW who will come after her. Melissa sees her engagement and academic achievement connected to AAUW that she has not yet even encountered. She wishes to do well for the sake of those AAUW that will come after she has graduated from college. She emphatically illuminates this point:

I feel like in a sense, I am making it for a lot of people. I feel like one of the biggest things that hold us back as AAUW is not being able to see ourselves in that spot; being academically successful. Being able to see someone else do it, says okay, or just gives you someone that you know has been there to talk to when times get tough.
In her statement above, Melissa eloquently makes the case for the burden that AAUW carry as they undertake efforts to achieve personal success while also carrying the burden to serve as an example to and for others. She sees herself as being that person that other AAUW can come and talk to. She expresses her need to be a model for her five year old niece. Melissa also wants to continue a legacy of academic achievement that has been in her family down through many generations. She states that “it is a sense of holding a family tradition of going to school and making sure that I get my education.”

Storm plans to use her experiences at UC Joplin to further her career in the job market after graduation. She stated that to use the name of the university and faculty associations to help network will be a big deal, and she will use her former engagement practices to get her into different spaces to which African American women may not have been afforded accessibility. She wants to become recognized as a UC Joplin alum. She desires to go back home and become involved in her community. She particularly wants to work with an underserved population, providing dental care.

Most participants echoed Erykah’s sentiments when she spoke about her post-graduation plans being interconnected to her present engagement. AAUW believed that their post-graduation plans are inevitably intertwined with their academic engagement in their major fields of study, and how well they do in their academically as they matriculate through college. Many of these women felt that the strong sense of agency they developed was a direct result of engaging meaningfully with peers, staff, and faculty.

Summary

This chapter covered the findings and analyses of the data collected from face-to-face interviews. Data obtained from the nine African American undergraduate women participants’ interviews included the women’s perceptions of their academic and social engagement practices and experiences. Furthermore, the data provided an insight into
each participant’s personal understanding of engagement and how Black women perceived themselves collectively and individually undertaking engagement in a predominantly White environment, as raced and gendered beings, in and out of the classroom space.

Bailey, Elena, and Jasmine found that academic and social engagement activities were relatively more segregated in college than they were in high school. They reported that they knew that there were unwritten rules in high school that students understood about who hung out with whom. After coming to college they quickly learned some of their academic and social engagement practices changed and were being forced upon them because of the practices of the institution. Although they may have socialized and studied with women of various races and ethnicities in high school, the dominance of race became more pronounced than they ever could have imagined in the collegiate environment. As stated earlier in the content of the interviews, Elena was always in Advanced Placement courses, and most of her peers were students from other races and ethnic backgrounds. Bailey is from a middle-class family and neighborhood, and her engagement in high school was not limited to solely African American students. Jasmine had always interacted with diverse peer groups. Although Jasmine still participates in cross-racial groups, coming to college has changed how comfortable she is with being among women unlike herself.

The need to engage with faculty was important to these participants. Some women chose to interact with professors who were not in their field of study. The support garnered from these interactions was a catalyst for building self-confidence for these women, which they saw as instrumental in succeeding academically. Black faculty, particularly women, were determined to have had more congenial engagement
interactions with AAUW. The participants deemed their engagement with faculty while they matriculated in college was also related to their post-graduation planning.

Conclusion

All nine of the participants viewed academic and social engagement as important to their academic achievement in college. Although student-faculty interaction was not as frequent or congenial, participants deemed this type of engagement to be important. If faculty members are not approachable, engaging with another adult who serves as instructor was beneficial to their academic achievement. Realizing that their career trajectories were intertwined with their present performance, participants saw the benefit of forming relationships with students and professors in college. Supportive persons and spaces were deemed significant to their comfort levels at UC Joplin. Engaging in the new learning environment meant modifying past practices of engagement for some participants who came from multiracial environments in high school. They found ways to engage, particularly involving heterogeneous groups. The participants’ narratives underscore the importance of establishing support networks for academic achievement and sisterly support in the social arena.

The next chapter will detail conclusions, findings, implications, and recommendations. Additionally, how the discourse for other underrepresented students can be informed by the findings of this study will be addressed. Implications for future study, theory, and practice will be discussed. This dissertation concludes with my final thoughts.
Chapter 8
Conclusions, Findings, and Implications

In this dissertation, I explored the experiences and resulting perceptions of nine academically successful African American undergraduate women in order to understand the influences of their academic and social engagement practices on their overall achievements at the University of California, Joplin, an elite, public, predominantly White university in Northern California. The goal of this study was to highlight their views about academic and social engagement practices and their academic achievement. By employing the lenses of Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009), I sought to describe how the women’s perceptions of engagement and the concept’s relationship to their academic success inside and outside of the classroom influenced their academic achievement. Because of their intersectionality of having race and gender based identities as women and African Americans (Crenshaw, 1993), I examined how their engagement in college was interrelated with their practices and strategies used when conversing about their academic and social engagement, and the relationship among these strategies to their academic success in college.

In this chapter, first I provide an overview of this phenomenological study. Second, I highlight key findings related to the first two research questions and discuss how these women’s experiences can inform the academic achievement discourse regarding ways to improve the educational outcomes of historically underrepresented students. Third, I provide implications, about the ways in which higher education research, policy and practice should proceed in order to better address the unique needs of African American undergraduate women. Lastly, I end this dissertation with my own concluding thoughts about the findings that emerged from this study that explores the
engagement practices, challenges, and successes of AAUW that contribute to their academic success.

Overview of Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the perceptions of high achieving African American undergraduate women about the influence of their personal engagement activities on their academic achievement at the University of California at Joplin (UCJ), a public, elite, predominantly White university in Northern California. Because there are limited recent scholarly investigations concerning African American undergraduate women and their engagement in college, I focused this study on how academic and social engagement practices in and out of the classroom setting impacted their academic success in college.

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:
1) What are African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of their academic and social engagement practices at the University of California Joplin?
2) How do these practices shape their experiences and academic success on campus?
3) How can these women’s experiences inform the academic achievement discourse regarding ways to improve the educational outcomes of historically underrepresented students?

Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit nine participants who met the following criteria: 1) African American undergraduate women in their sophomore, junior, or senior year of college, 2) GPA of 3.0 or above, 3) began their college career at UC Joplin, 4) self-identified as African American, and 5) and were 18 years of age or older. The purpose for selecting women with a 3.0 GPA was to understand how engagement influenced participants academically and to highlight those women who were doing well academically in an environment that researchers argue is less nurturing.
and supportive to African American students than an HBCU (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000, 2009) and Engagement Theory (Kuh et al., 2005) were selected to guide this study in order to explore how AAUW perceived the influence of engagement on their academic achievement.

All of the participants attended the University of California at Joplin, which is located in the city of Joplin in Northern California. The demographics of the university show African American undergraduates to represent two percent of the student population, and African American undergraduate women are even a smaller percentage of the student population (CA Gov, 2011).

The women selected to participate in this research project came from several different fields of study and college majors (e.g. social welfare, political economy, business administration) at the university. Participants were recruited by use of a recruitment letter that was sent by email to administrators, faculty and staff, the director of the African American Theme Floor in a residence hall, and by a number of student services personnel. The student recruitment letter was also was posted and/or disseminated to students. Fifteen students interested in participating in this study contacted me via telephone and email, and we set a time and location that was most convenient for them to meet. Learning about the experiences of students from different familial backgrounds, majors, college levels, geographical areas, and residences provided a rich thick description of the women’s perceptions of their engagement practices. Ultimately nine students were selected for the study because they met all criteria and agreed to participate.
Key Findings

Research questions one and two are addressed in the following sections and key findings are provided for each of the questions. Question three will be discussed along with the findings in questions one and two respectively because Question three explores how these findings can be used to inform educational outcomes in the previous two questions.

Research Question One: What are African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of their academic and social engagement practices at the University of California Joplin?

Through the use of existing literature, demographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, photographs, unofficial transcripts, and analytical memos, I was able to describe the essence of what AAUW in this study deemed to be the academic and social engagement activities on a PWI campus in Northern California that they perceived to be key influencers of their academic achievement. Five significant findings emerged.

Key Finding Number One:

1) African American undergraduate women perceived that their academic and social engagement was practiced in an atmosphere that was not hospitable to their full participation in the collegiate environment. AAUW perceived that they were thought to be less scholarly than all students and women of other races. Contrary to benchmarks listed in Engagement theory (Kuh, et al., 2005) where students’ educational experiences are enriched by involvement with diverse student populations, AAUW found that their engagement centered around other AAUW.
Key Finding Number Two:

Perceived disadvantages of academic and social engagement did not derail commitment to academic achievement

AAUW were not derailed from their commitment to academic achievement despite their perceiving themselves as being disadvantaged in their personal academic and social activities. Moreover, they alleged that it is more difficult to gain support from faculty members in their departments because they were made to feel as though they should know the material once it was taught in class. One student, Melissa, commented “I still don’t get it, could I be this stupid?” Melissa’s plight relates to the research reported by Lundberg (2010) where he found that under-represented minorities often report not having a true assessment of how they are performing in class. He also reported findings that demonstrate that college student satisfaction with faculty relationships appears to vary by race, with White students reporting most satisfaction and African American and Native American students showing the least satisfaction.

Key Finding Number Three:

Hostile racial climates at PWIs cause feelings of isolation for AAUW.

The AAUW who were all high-achieving felt that their intellectual abilities for academic work were not taken seriously. These women witnessed White women and women of other races being treated differently than they were treated by faculty. Perceptions of different treatment caused these women to feel isolated and marginalized. These feelings of marginalization had the potential to cause the women to disengage. Because they were limited in their engagement with women unlike themselves and faculty unlike themselves, they used homogeneous engagement with same race and gender peers to combat the hostility and isolation that could have negatively affected
their academic achievement, and instead used supportive and affirming persons and spaces to foster their academic success.

The nine AAUW believed that their academic and social engagement centered primarily on their association and collaboration with other African American undergraduate women. These participants’ alleged women of other races were not receptive to engaging in cross-racial endeavors with AAUW. Therefore, the participants’ ways of engaging in social and academic activities were not always their choice, but were dictated by other women, because of the oppressive nature resulting from the racial composition of the classes and the collegiate environment.

AAUW revealed that academic engagement went beyond just showing up for class. This type of engagement involved 1) extending their understanding of classroom material by holding discussions with others outside of classroom hours, 2) sharing study guides, 3) going to office hours to meet with professors, and 4) and seeking out help from upperclassmen who were in their same major and had taken upper-level classes previously. Through two conversations with each participant, I recognized that they were aware that they were very engaged while in college. They never took time out before participating in this study to really assess their academic and social engagement, or extract how their engagement or lack thereof impacted their academic achievement. These women were so focused on doing well academically that they at times completely neglected any social involvement on campus or with friends. In Randall’s (2013) article about student engagement, he notes that African American undergraduate women are relatively more academically engaged than their male counterparts and spend more time studying. The data analyzed in this study are consistent with those results from Randall’s (2013) article and Harper et al.’s, (2004) research study on engagement differences for Black men and women. While Harper’s study involved only samples of African American
undergraduate women from HBCU campuses, the same engagement practices are apparent for the women at this particular PWI. While not comparing data from African American undergraduate men, in this study the participants spent time engaging in mostly same race/gender study groups, using study guides, going to tutoring, contacting upperclassmen who had the courses previously in an effort to boost their academic achievement.

To avoid being slighted, the participants chose to engage with other AAUW. They felt a sense of comfort when engaging with same race and gender peers outside of class, because for many of the participants, they were often the only African American represented in a class of two to three hundred students. The racial and demographic make-up of certain classes may be changing in the future. African American women are now majoring more and more in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields; but there is not yet a critical mass of African American women in these classes at HBCUs, which was particularly evident in the sciences at a predominantly White university like UC Joplin.

_Research Question Two: How do these practices shape their experiences and academic success on campus?_

Study participants articulated clear and strong insights regarding the need for a more welcoming and congenial climate on campus inside and outside classroom spaces in order to increase their feelings of being welcomed and included in academic and social life. They vocalized their not wanting to be marginalized and objectified as they undertook academic and social engagements. AAUW felt constricted by the climate of the institution. Because they felt that the college environment was hostile toward them, they were unable, not by their choice, to fully engage in the college experience. They were limited in their engagement with non-AAUW both inside and outside of the classroom.
setting. They felt misunderstood and stereotyped by peers and professors. Because AAUW felt that their engagement practices with diverse groups of peers and faculty were limited, they gained support to perform well academically from homogeneous groups of AAUW, and Black faculty.

**Key Finding Number Four:**

*PWIs should create campus climates that will foster academic achievement for AAUW*

The nine undergraduate women in this study all felt that, depending on the group activity in which they were involved the group dynamics and engagement activity determined their academic and social practices. The type and setting of engagement had shaped their overall experiences and academic success on campus. Just as Bryant-Davis (2013), Mitchell (2000), and Winkle-Wagner (2009) described the positive experience of culturally specific groups as a benefit for African American women, being a part of classes and study groups where these women were the only African American present was an isolating and debilitating experience that affected their academic success, leaving them feeling unsupported and alienated. As the literature indicates, engaging in a student organization has the benefit of fostering a sense of community for African American college women (Bryant-Davis, 2013; Mitchell, 2000; Patton & McClure, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). All of the women agreed that had it not been for their living on the Afro Theme Floor, going to the African American Student Development Office, or receiving mentoring, tutoring, and guidance from African American female faculty they possible would not be able to work to their maximum potential.

**Key Finding Number Five:**

*A AUW require support from both African American and White faculty for their post-graduation engagement*
Study results indicate that if African American women choose to attend predominantly White institutions, they must have support systems in place to by the institution to support their efforts to achieve success. While participants reported having positive engagements when they interacted with Black faculty, none reported having faculty from other ethnic backgrounds that they felt were supportive of them. They did report, however, that graduate student instructors of all races and genders were genuinely helpful and supportive. The women in this study reported that they perceived their present academic and social engagement practices were interrelated with their future post-graduation plans. Some AAUW were set on entering graduate school after graduating with their bachelor’s degree while others intended to pursue careers in their chosen profession. They saw faculty recommendations and networks necessary to their successful transition to their future plans.

**Implications**

The overarching question of this study focused on African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of their engagement practices and how their engagement influenced their academic achievement. I drew on Collins’ (2000, 2009) Black Feminist Thought and Kuh et al.,’s (2005) Engagement theory to analyze AAUW’s perceptions of their academic and social engagement and the resulting effect these practices had on their academic success in college.

As mentioned earlier, these women were not deterred from achieving academically, even though they encountered obstacles. Participants believed that more research needs to be undertaken that captures the voices of African American undergraduate women. An understanding is needed of the support mechanisms that are lacking in these women’s’ college environment. For other underrepresented populations of women, they also need their voices heard in order to determine those academic and
social strategies they have in common with AAUWs, and to capitalize on common strategies of engagement that lead to academic success.

The AAUW in this study encountered challenges to their academic and social engagement in the college environment. Given the reality that women of other underrepresented groups may experience some of the same challenges that AAUW experience, special efforts should be made by faculty and institutions to ensure promotion of effective engagement activities for women that may be at risk for disengagement. This study provides implications for research, policy, and practice.

**Implications for Practice**

Patton and Harper (2003) suggest that more faculty of color on college campuses would help African American students feel less isolated. As students shared their perceptions of their academic and social engagement practices at the university, some common themes occurred. These themes included: a) the need for supportive and affirming spaces and faculty, particularly women, b) mentoring to help AAUW to achieve academic and social engagement, c) implement proactive mental health strategies that provide support and resources while also promote effective self-efficacy by students, and d) necessity for financial assistance to AAUW. In addition to highlighting these recurring themes, I have incorporated opportunities for practice. I have categorized these opportunities for practice into possibilities for inside and outside classroom spaces.

**Inside Classroom Spaces.** Determining strategies and initiatives that will result in having more faculty, administrators, and staff of color with for students to engage with would benefit AAUW. These women could be provided with more academic and social support to lessen the feelings of isolation felt on PWIs by AAUW. Having more faculty of color could provide engagement with particular student populations early in their collegiate careers, and may assist African American undergraduate women with
opportunities to engage with university representatives in meaningful ways. Engagement with faculty, administrators, and staff will encourage students’ success, and would provide direct access to mentoring, academic and professional development opportunities. AAUW functioned under a tremendous amount of stress due to isolation and hostility they encountered on campus. However, they still found ways to overcome their stressful encounters to remain academically successful.

Just as AAUW are hindered in their academic and social engagement in college, this could be the case for other women of underrepresented groups. Similar to AAUW, if these other women do not see an abundance of peers who look like them, this could hamper their engagement and achievement. Moreover, if there are a limited amount of faculty at the university that are representative of other underrepresented groups, low representation limits their access to engagement activities with professors who look like them.

AAUW recommended that more faculty of color be employed at the collegiate level. More faculty of color should be employed in disciplines where they have not been traditionally visible, such as the math and sciences. Because few AAUW were enrolled in the math and science fields, often causing them to be the only AAUW in class, having a faculty member of color as an instructor would lessen a feeling of isolation for AAUW who were in those fields of study.

**Outside Classroom Spaces.** Engagement with AAUW graduates of the university served as supportive networks for AAUW presently matriculating at the college. They came by the residence halls and offered assistance with academic work. Because of this active collaborative learning practice, the women felt it necessary that a formal structure of mentoring be put in place. This positive engagement practice would allow AAUW to be supported in a manner whereby each African American freshmen
undergraduate woman should be assigned a mentor that is either a junior or senior to help them through their first year of college. These improvements may provide opportunities for African American undergraduate women to find mentors on their campus. Not only would a formal structure of mentoring benefit AAUW, but efforts to create an inclusive environment for students of all races. AAUW recommended that this objective might be achieved through ensuring that there exist cultural icons (art, sculpture, and building names) that affirm diverse student identities on campus.

Implications for Policy

Research findings resulting from this study could provide information from which institutions can begin to evaluate current policies to better understand their impact on the lived experiences of African American undergraduate women. Institutional policies that could be instituted should consider AAUW needs inside and outside of the classroom.

Outside Classroom Spaces. Academic administrators might use data from this study to enhance faculty orientation in the area of mentoring undergraduate students (Robinson & Franklin, 2011). It is imperative that colleges review their policies in order to increase the number and variety of initiatives that contribute to successful outcomes for students. For example, ensure strategic integration of student recruitment and awarding of scholarships/financial aid to students. Implement faculty and staff recruitment and retention strategies for underrepresented minority populations to ensure their presence, visibility, and engagement. This is especially important for those individuals from historically underrepresented communities.

Inside Classroom Spaces. An example of a policy to foster more inclusiveness, knowledge about, and engagement of AAUW with students and staff from diverse backgrounds would be to insist that there exist cultural examples and references in curriculum that are relevant and affirm diverse student identities. Additionally, staff should
be cognizant of lone AAUW participating in large classes and ensure that they are integrated into a class group that would be comprised of classmates that seemed congenial to their participation in the group. Findings from the study could also contribute to the revision of policies and initiatives in order to better align them with goals for increasing student engagement, academic success, and student satisfaction in the classroom.

**Implications for Research**

In addition to implications for practice and policy, an investigation of participants’ perceptions and experiences of engagement on a PWI offers new insights into academic and social engagement of AAUW. This study of the influence of engagement on the academic achievement of AAUW has been absent in the literature. Therefore, the importance of highlighting what we do not already know helps to expand knowledge in the field of engagement in postsecondary education for diverse groups of students. What follows is an overview of studies centering around the importance of engagement in postsecondary context and how AAUW have experienced engagement. Additionally, a focus on research implications for the study of engagement gleaned from this study and suggestions for future research.

**African American Undergraduate Women and Engagement.** African American undergraduate women have not been, and are not, the center of research studies concerning potential positive outcomes of engagement (Chambers & Poock, 2011). Studies concerning engagement are centered on White middle-class students and African American males in college settings (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Scholars such as Strayhorn (2008), Harper (2012), and Cuyjet (2006), have conducted extensive research on the experiences and engagement of Black male collegians at HBCUs and PWIs. Although Harper et al. (2004) have written about African
American undergraduate females and their engagement on HBCUs, the quantitative study had a population of African American males in the sample. The topic of high achieving AAUWs engagement on elite predominantly White institutions is not widespread in the extant literature. Most participants commented that the term engagement was one that was new to them, and they had never thought about.

African American women still face challenges in the collegiate environment inside and outside of classroom settings. Although the demographics of higher education campuses have changed, with more women than men enrolled, support systems that promote African American women’s success are limited to non-existent (Robinson & Franklin, 2011).

This Study and Future Research

Future research needs to be undertaken to better understand the experiences and aspects of campus culture and environment that most directly impact student engagement, persistence and achievement for these women (Walpole, 1999). Studies that investigate the types of engagement practices that have a positive impact on this population’s achievement could help fill the gap in current higher education discourse. Studies should be implemented that investigate the intersection of student perceptions of challenges and/or obstacles that detract from AAUW’s “full engagement” academically. A study similar to this one could also be conducted on African American women who are transfer students, enrolled in private universities, less selective four-year institutions, and community colleges.

Limitations

This study highlighted the experiences of African American undergraduate women at UC Joplin, a four-year public, predominantly White, elite university in Northern California, and may differ from those institutions that are less selective, in other cities,
states, or regions of the country. Since the participants in this study were considered to be high achieving undergraduate scholars, students having GPAs lower than 3.0 were not eligible to participate in the study. Although students having GPAs lower than 3.0 may be achieving other types of success (e.g. athletically, personally, extracurricular activities, etc.), this study focused on academic achievement. Therefore, the overarching goal of the study was to focus on academic achievement and no other forms of achievement; students that that did not have high GPA were not considered to be academically achieving in this study. Transfer students were not included in this study because they may have college experiences outside of UC Joplin that influenced their achievement and involvement in academic and social engagement practices that may not be shaped by UC Joplin. Since longitudinal data were not collected for this study, I was unable to provide a comprehensive analysis of their academic progress over the course of multiple semesters, except for their grades on the unofficial transcripts.

Concluding Thoughts

The African American undergraduate women in this study were highly engaged academically and socially as they perceived and defined the terms of their engagement. They perceived that engagement, could facilitate and/or hinder their academic achievement. All participants believed because they were African American women, they had a duty and desire to achieve academically to refute the stereotype that this student population are only in college because of Affirmative Action. Although race-based admissions have been outlawed in this state, AAUW are still stereotyped as unintelligent, and less capable than women of other races and ethnic backgrounds. This study detailed how these women navigated their engagement inside and outside of the classroom setting. The AAUW in the study chose very carefully their practices of how to
execute their engagement in order to cause their practices to work to each individual’s benefit.

The findings of this study have illuminated a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American undergraduate women and their engagement on a predominantly White campus. Their narratives provide a glimpse into the obstacles, hardships, hostility, and isolation they have encountered and endured during their attempts to engage at the university. Their individual and collective stories help to give voice to their perceptions of how they are a raced and gendered being that is often rendered silent, invisible, denigrated, and marginalized.

African American undergraduate women’s perceptions about their engagement practices, both academically and socially, differ from what present research highlights concerning African American males and middle-class white collegians (Harper, 2012). The participants are both constricted by others in their ability to fully demonstrate their engagement practices because of institutional environments that are not hospitable to them as AAUW. Therefore, they must circumvent the segregated positions in which they find themselves, being limited to interactions both academically and socially with the majority of other Black undergraduate women. AAUW learned to use their positions as a marginalized group as a motivator to counteract long held beliefs about their intellectual competence. They did not allow themselves to be victims of a society that did not value them; choosing to make their own pathways to garner academic success. Although they were small in number on the campus, they developed a close-knit family like group. These women have not let the lack of maximum collaborative learning experiences and opportunities on campus deter them from achieving GPAs of 3.0 or higher. They have not rendered themselves victims, but instead see themselves as role models and pathfinders for other AAUW.
The findings of this study provide a glimpse of engagement practices through the lens of this undergraduate population. The benefits of engagement in terms of going the extra mile to do self-initiated research on topics discussed in class, having intellectual conversations and debates with fellow class members, seeking out other student that have taken the same classes previously, going to office hours with professors and/or graduate teaching assistants, and involving themselves in tutoring are just some of the ways that these women foster their academic achievement. Without continued incorporation of their voices in the discourse concerning engagement in college, a monolithic view of African American undergraduate students and the benefits of engagement to their academic achievement may not be fully understood.

Throughout this labor of love I called my dissertation, I recognized how some of the experiences of present day AAUW mirrored my own collegiate experiences. I embarked upon this study to explore how AAUW make sense of their engagement at one selective four-year university. I never expected to find that these women were going through some of the same and worse obstacles to academic achievement than I experienced. As I interviewed each AAUW, I was reminded that I never had the opportunity to participate in a research study about my experiences, engagement, and achievement at a public four-year university in the 1970s. I find it remarkable that decades later, AAUW and engagement in postsecondary education still remains somewhat stagnant, even retrenched. Because there continues to be limited research on the realities of AAUW on college campuses across the US, I decided to contribute to the literature regarding AAUW and their engagement in college and its relationship to their academic achievement.
As I became deeply immersed in the process of analyzing the data, I felt as though I was reliving my collegiate experiences. Although I am sever decades older than these young ladies, I learned several lessons through our conversations:

1) African American undergraduate women consider academic achievement to be their ultimate goal of college attendance, 2) perceived disadvantages of academic and social engagement did not derail academic achievement, 3) hostile racial climates on PWIs caused feelings of isolation for AAUW 4) PWIs should make efforts to create campus climates that will foster academic achievement for AAUW, and 5) AAUW require support from White faculty and Black faculty in order to be prepared for post-graduation engagement.

I was able to reflect on the fact that I had one African American woman professor during my undergraduate and graduate school year. Through my experiences in higher education as a student, an employee, and parent, I did not expect to meet another African American woman professor while pursuing my doctoral degree.

I must say that there was no substitute for engaging with someone who looked like me and understood some of the nuances of my collegiate participation. As I progressed through this doctoral degree program, I found her mentoring and advising very necessary to my success and completion. I fully understood what the AAUW in this study meant when they described aspects of their engagement practices---one being the necessity of having Black women faculty to help them maneuver PWI culture and employ engagement strategies necessary to persist to graduation.

As I am near the end of this academic journey, I feel the labor pains lessening and I am proud to be finally giving birth to this intense undertaking after months of carrying it with me in every aspect of my life. However, I would not take anything for the
journey, and oh what a journey it has been! My hope is that all who read the findings of this study will have even a greater appreciation of what fortitude it takes for AAUW to be academically successful at the nation’s elite PWIs. I applaud the engagement of the women of this study and plan to support them in every way possible to help them continue to succeed academically and progress to graduation.
Appendix A

Recruitment Letter to Faculty/Staff
Greetings UC Joplin Administrators, Leaders, Faculty and Staff!

My name is Bernice N. King-Strong and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Arlington in the College of Education and Health Professions, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS). As an administrator/leader/faculty/staff of a department/program/organization/club at University of California, Joplin (UC Joplin), I am writing today in regards to my interests in conducting a research study to investigate the experiences of African American undergraduate women on your campus.

For this study, I seek to understand the perceptions of African American college women concerning their academic and social engagement practices and the influence on their academic achievement in college. In particular, this study seeks to provide these undergraduate women with an opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives about ways they have used specific practices on and/or off campus to achieve academic success.

Please note that participants in this study must be currently enrolled at University of California, Joplin, be 18 years of age or older, self-identify as an African American/Black woman, have a 3.0 GPA or higher, and be in their sophomore through senior years of college. Transfer students are not eligible to participate in this study.

African American undergraduate women who are selected for this study will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, participate in two face-to-face interviews lasting between 60 to 90 minutes each, and submit photograph(s) that represent how they are academically and/or socially engaged on and/or off campus. During the interviews, participants will be asked questions about their personal history, academic and social practices in college and how these practices influence academic achievement.

The interviews will be audio recorded with students’ permission to ensure accuracy of what is said. This procedure is a requirement of the study because I do not want to misquote or misrepresent the student’s responses. Once the interviews are transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-word, the researcher may contact participants to obtain additional information about and/or to clarify participants’ responses. Each participant will also have the opportunity to review a draft of their interview and provide feedback on the data presented. The interview will take place in a location and at a time most convenient for the participant. At the end of each interview, participants can ask questions about the research study. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time.

There are minimal risks in participating in this study.

Taking part in this study is voluntary and will not impact students’ work and/or opportunities at The University of California at Joplin. If students agree to participate in this study, Steps will be taken to ensure their confidentiality.

If you would like more information about this study, please contact Bernice N. King-Strong at: bernice.strong@mavs.uta.edu, or 817-475-4207.
Thank you for your time and support. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Bernice N. King-Strong, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education and Health Professions
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Appendix B

Recruitment Letter to Student Participants
Dear Undergraduate Scholar,

My name is Bernice N. King-Strong; I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Education and Health Professions, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS) at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am writing to ask you to participate in a research study I am conducting to investigate the experiences of African American undergraduate women at University of California, Joplin (UC Joplin). The purpose of this study is to investigate your perceptions of the academic and social engagement practices on and/or off campus that influence your achievement in college. The number of participants needed for the study will be 10 undergraduate women. The first 10 African American undergraduate women who respond to this letter will be selected to participate in the study. Each participant will be compensated with a $15.00 gift certificate to the campus bookstore at the conclusion of each interview. Please note that participants in this study must be currently enrolled at University of California, Joplin, be 18 years of age or older, self-identify as an African American/Black woman, have a 3.0 GPA or higher, and must be in their sophomore through senior years of college. Transfer students are not eligible to participate in this study.

The research project includes three phases of data collection. Participants will be asked to complete a demographic information sheet to obtain personal and academic background information about you. You will also engage in two face-to-face audio-recorded interviews. More specifically, you will be asked questions about your personal and educational background as well as the academic and social activities you are involved in on and/or off campus as a college student. Each interview will last between 60 to 90 minutes and take place at locations and times that are most convenient for you. During the second interview, you will be requested to bring six self-selected photograph(s) that you believe represents your involvement in academically and/or socially engaged practices on and/or off campus. At the end of each interview, you will have an opportunity to ask any questions about the research study.

The interviews will be audio-recorded. This procedure is a requirement of being in the study because I do not want to misrepresent or misquote you. Once the interview is transcribed verbatim, which means word-for-word as they were recorded, I may contact you to obtain additional information about your responses. You will have an opportunity to review the draft transcript of your interview, and provide feedback on the contents.

Taking part in this study is voluntary and will not impact your work and/or opportunities at University of California, Joplin. If you agree to participate in this study, steps will be taken to ensure your confidentiality. Not only are there are minimal risks in participating in this study, but also you may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please contact me using the information listed below.

Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,
Bernice N. King-Strong, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education and Health Professions
Department of Educational Leadership
bernice.strong@mavs.uta.edu
817-475-4207
Appendix C

Initial Email Response to Selected Participants
Hello __________________,

I want to first and foremost thank you for responding to my email inviting you to participate in my research study concerning African American undergraduate women’s academic and social engagement practices at University of California, Joplin (UC Joplin).

I would like to schedule an interview with you at a time and location that is most convenient for you. I would appreciate your providing me with your phone number as well as a copy of your schedule or a list of possible days and times that work for you so that I can suggest times that might be convenient for us to meet. If you have any questions, comments and/or concerns, you may contact me at the information listed below.

Thank you for your time and support. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Bernice King-Strong, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate
The University of Texas at Arlington
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
bernice.strong@mavs.uta.edu
817-475-4207
Appendix D

Reminder Script for First Interview
Hello (student’s name),

This is Bernice King-Strong, a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Arlington. I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study on the academic and social engagement practices of African American undergraduate women at University of California at Joplin.

This message is a reminder of your interview, which will be held on (date), at (time) in (location).

I also want to remind you that at the conclusion of the second interview, you will receive a $15.00 gift certificate to the campus bookstore as a token of appreciation for your time and effort at the conclusion of each interview.

If you have any questions in the meantime, please call me at 817-475-4207 or email at bernice.strong@mavs.uta.edu.

I look forward to meeting with you soon.

Have a great day/evening/night.
Appendix E

Informed Consent Document
UT Arlington

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Bernice N. King-Strong
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education and Health Professions
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Email: Bernice.strong@mavs.uta.edu
Telephone: 817-475-4207

FACULTY ADVISOR
Dr. Ifeoma Amah
Assistant Professor
The University of Texas at Arlington
College of Education and Health Professions
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

TITLE OF PROJECT
African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of the influence of engagement practices on their academic achievement

INTRODUCTION
You are being asked to participate in a research study about African American undergraduate women’s perceptions of how their academic and social engagement practices influences their academic achievement in college.

PURPOSE
The purpose of this research is to examine the perceptions of African American women about the ways in which they are able to achieve academically in college.

DURATION
You will be asked to participate in two face-to-face interviews that will each last between 60-90 minutes.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
The number of anticipated participants in this research will be 10 African American undergraduate women.

IRB Approval Date: SEP 1 2 2014
IRB Expiration Date: SEP 1 2 2015
PROCEDURES
1. Complete a demographic questionnaire.
2. Take and submit photos related to your academic and social engagement practices as an African American undergraduate woman.
3. Participate in two face-to-face interviews each lasting between 60-90 minutes.

First you will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire to obtain general information about your personal and academic background. Second, you will also engage in two face-to-face audio-recorded interviews. More specifically, you will be asked questions about your personal and educational experiences as well as the academic and social activities you are involved in on and/or off campus as a college student. After the interviews, the digital recordings will be transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher and/or a professional transcriber. Third, the photographs that you decide to share with me will be used as an additional method for you to discuss your academic and social engagement practices in college. The photographs will be returned to you at the conclusion of the research study. Your photos will not be displayed in any conferences, event or publication without your permission. The recordings will be kept with the transcripts for potential research involving African American undergraduate women. The audio recordings and the transcriptions will not be used for any future research purposes not described here. The recordings and other documents will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) in Trimble Hall 103J for which only the researcher has access. All study materials including interview recordings, transcriptions, and transcripts will be destroyed three years after all study procedures have concluded.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS
There will be no direct benefits for your participation in the study. However, there may be benefits to other undergraduate women of color in higher education. These benefits may include knowledge of strategies, practices, activities, resources, and support networks used by African American undergraduate women that foster success in college. In doing so, other women could benefit from the results gained from this study and incorporate this information into their own academic and social engagement practices.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
There are no foreseeable risks and/or discomforts that you will encounter as a result of participation in this study. Every effort will be made to protect your anonymity. Participants will be allowed to choose a pseudonym (i.e. fake name) to protect their identity. If you feel uncomfortable at any point during this study, you have the right to

IRB Approval Date: SEP 1 2 2014
IRB Expiration Date: SEP 1 2 2015
UT Arlington

discontinue your participation at any time at no consequence. Should you experience any
discomfort, please inform me. You have the right to quit any study procedures at any
time at no consequence.

COMPENSATION
You will be compensated with two $15.00 gift certificates to the campus bookstore. One
certificate will be given at the conclusion of each interview.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES
There will be no alternative procedures or courses of action offered for this study. You
may elect not to participate or may quit at any time with no consequences.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent
and to discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. Please note that you
will be compensated with a $15.00 gift certificate to the campus bookstore for your time
and effort at the end of each completed interview.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of
this signed consent form and all data collected [including the demographic information
sheet, photos, audio recordings and transcriptions] from this study will be stored in a
locked file cabinet at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) in Trimble Hall 103J
for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be
published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional
research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your
information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous.

Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of
Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University
of Texas at Arlington, and personnel particular to this research have access to the study
records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal
requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The
IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this
consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review
Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the
confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by

IRB Approval Date: SEP 12 2014

IRB Expiration Date: SEP 12 2015
UT Arlington

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS
Questions about this research may be directed to Bernice N. King-Strong at bernice.strong@mavs.uta.edu or 817-475-4207, Dr. Ifeoma Amah at iamah@uta.edu, or 817-272-0991. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or a research related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-271-2105 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

CONSENT
By signing below, you ___________________________ (print name) confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study’s purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.
You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER

DATE

IRB Approval Date: SEP 12 2014

IRB Expiration Date: SEP 12 2015
Appendix F

Reminder Script for Second Interview
Hello (student’s name),

This is Bernice King-Strong, a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Arlington. I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study on the academic and social engagement practices of African American undergraduate women at the University of California at Joplin.

This message is a reminder of your second interview, which will be held on (date), at (time) in (location). Please remember to bring to the interview with you photograph(s) that represent your engagement in academic and social practices as a college student.

At the conclusion of this interview, you will receive a $15.00 gift certificate to the campus bookstore as a token of appreciation for your time and effort.

If you have any questions in the meantime, please call me at 817-475-4207 or email at bernice.strong@mavs.uta.edu.

I look forward to meeting with you soon.

Have a great day/evening/night.
Appendix G

Participant Demographic Questionnaire
Please fill in the blanks or circle/check, the most appropriate answer for the following questions. You may leave responses blank if you prefer not to answer a specific question(s):

**What pseudonym (i.e. fake name) would you like to use for this study?**

___________________________________________________

_____

**Hometown**

___________________________________________________

**What is your racial or ethnic background?**

___________________________________________________

**Age:**

**What is/are the highest educational attainment level(s) of your parent(s)?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Degree/Masters</td>
<td>Professional Degree/Masters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates Degree/Certificate</td>
<td>Associates Degree/Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college credits</td>
<td>some college credits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
<td>High School Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some High School courses</td>
<td>Some High School courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other__________</td>
<td>Other__________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Did any other members of your family attend this university?** Yes_____ No_____  

**Family member/Relationship/ Degree Obtained**

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________
The name of the high school you attended (Name/ City/ State)?

What was your high school Grade Point Average?

What were some activities/clubs/programs you participated in high school?
(Academic, service organizations, ethnic clubs, etc.)

What is your current academic standing at UC Joplin?
☐☐ ☐☐ Sophomore  ☐☐ ☐☐ Junior  ☐☐ ☐☐ Senior  ☐☐ ☐☐ Other

What is/was your academic major(s)/ minor(s)?

What is your university Grade Point Average?

Anticipated date (semester & year) of your college graduation?

What is your contact information?
Phone:
Email:
__________________________________________________________
Appendix H

Prompt for Photograph Activity
Dear Student,

As a participant in this study, I would like for you to bring 6 photographs depicting your engagement in academic and social activities in and outside of class (Note: Please bring 3 photos of academic activities and 3 photos for social activities). These pictures may contain you and other individuals (i.e. friends, family, and faculty), group, items, resources, activities, etc. You will be asked to describe what these pictures mean to you and how your engagement with these people/activities/practices/ programs/ etc. shapes your academic achievement at UC Joplin.

Because I wish to capture your perceptions of what academic and social engagement means to you as college student, I want you to freely express through pictures how engagement has impacted your academic achievement.

These pictures will be returned to you at the end of the interview. At no time will your pictures be displayed in brochures or presented at conferences without your permission. Your confidentiality and identity as a participant in this study will be protected at all times.
Appendix I

Interview Protocol 1
The interview will begin with the researcher introducing herself and greeting the interviewee. The brief script will begin by saying: Hello, (Name of student will be inserted here)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I wish to remind you that the interview will be tape recorded. Do you have any questions for me before we begin? Is there anything that you require? If not, I will begin by asking you a few questions about yourself.

1. **Tell me about yourself?**
   A. Personal Background (e.g. hometown, familial background (single parent or two parent household, siblings, etc.), SES, first generation college student, Hobbies, etc.)
   B. Educational Background (e.g. High school? Involvement in extracurricular activities, etc.).

2. **What colleges and/or universities did you apply to your senior year of high school?**
   A. In state? Out of state?
   B. What schools were you accepted to your senior year of high school?

3. **Why did you decide to attend UC Joplin?**

4. **Tell me about your expectations of what your experience would be like at UC Joplin?**
   A. What did you know about the university ahead of time?
   B. Have you been surprised? If, so how?

5. **Can you tell me about your academic/social/ personal experiences at UC Joplin?**
   A. What are some of the academic/ social/ personal successes you have experienced as a student on campus?
   B. What are some of the academic/ social/ personal challenges you have encountered as a student on campus? In class and out of class.

6. **What kind of services, programs and/or resources are available to you on campus?**
   A. How have these services, programs and/or resources shaped your academic/ social/ personal experiences on campus?
B. Are there services that are racially/ethnically and/or gender specific?

7. What are your thoughts about the impact that your race/ethnicity and/or gender may have had and/or currently have on your academic/social/personal experiences in and out of class?
   a. What do you think are some advantages?
   b. What do you think are some disadvantages?

8. Describe some successes/challenges you may have had and/or are currently facing in and out of class as an African American woman. Do you think they are similar and/or differ from other women? Black men?

9. What role does being an African American woman play in your desire to succeed in college? What about UC Joplin?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences at UC Joplin that I have not asked about during this interview?

Reminder: Please remember to bring six photographs (3 for academic engagement practices and 3 for social engagement practices as a college student) to our next meeting.
Appendix J

Interview Protocol 2
The interviewer will read the opening statement again that was read initially at the first interview. This process will be instituted before the taped interview begins.

Thank you again for participating in the first interview. For the second interview, I am interested in learning about your perceptions of how academic and social engagement practices have influenced your achievement in college.

1. Can you tell about the pictures you brought to share with me?
2. What does academic engagement mean to you?
   a. Can you tell me about the pictures you brought that represents how you have been academically engaged at UC Joplin and/or in the community?
3. What does social engagement mean to you?
   a. Can you tell me about the pictures you brought that represents how you have been socially engaged at UC Joplin and/or in the community?
4. How would you describe the influence(s) of your academic and social engagement practices on your academic achievement in college?
5. What types of activities/programs/organizations do you participate in on campus and/or in the community?
   a. How often do you participate in these activities/programs/organizations?
   b. Tell me about the diversity of these groups. Are there members of your race/ethnicity? Other races/ethnicities?
6. Please describe how you have encouraged other African American women to become engaged in various activities on the campus or community (e.g. social, academic, leadership, etc.)
   a. What do you say to them?
   b. What was the response of African American women to your request?
7. Please describe the benefits and challenges you perceive to have experienced because of being engaged in academic and social practices/activities on the campus and/or in the community?
   a. From others (e.g. students, faculty)
8. How have your academic and social engagement practices influenced your feelings about your ability to be successful at University of California, Joplin?
9. Have you ever considered taking time off or leaving the university? If so, why?
a. Do you plan to graduate? When? Why not?

10. How do your academic and/or social engagement practices contribute to your plans after college?

11. Do you have anything else that you would like to share about academic and social engagement practices at UC Joplin that we may have not discussed?

Thank you again for participating in this study. I may contact you again if I have any further questions or need clarification about anything we discussed today. Please call me if you have any questions. I can be reached at bernice.strong@mavs.uta.edu or 817-475-4207.
References


http://dx.doi.org 10.4315/9781412963909.


Biographical Information

Dr. Bernice Norvella King-Strong is an Independent Consultant who works with secondary and post-secondary students and their parents to make students viable candidates for college entry into four-year institutions. She was previously a special education teacher and supervisor, an elementary, middle school and high school counselor, as well as a college lecturer and administrator. Her research interests include underrepresented students and outreach programs, African American undergraduate men and women college enrollment and persistence, and African American undergraduate women experiences with engagement. Her Bachelor of Science degree is in Elementary Education and Special Education from Texas A and M University, Commerce. Her Master of Education degree is in Special Education, Counseling and Student Personnel Administration degree is from Texas A and M University, Commerce. Her additional supervisory certificate is from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. She completed her PhD in K-16 Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of Texas at Arlington. She has served as a graduate teaching and research assistant in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies Program at the University of Texas at Arlington. She was recently honored in the 2014 publication of Who’s Who in America’s Colleges and Universities. She plans to continue her work preparing underrepresented students to successfully transition into and persist through college.